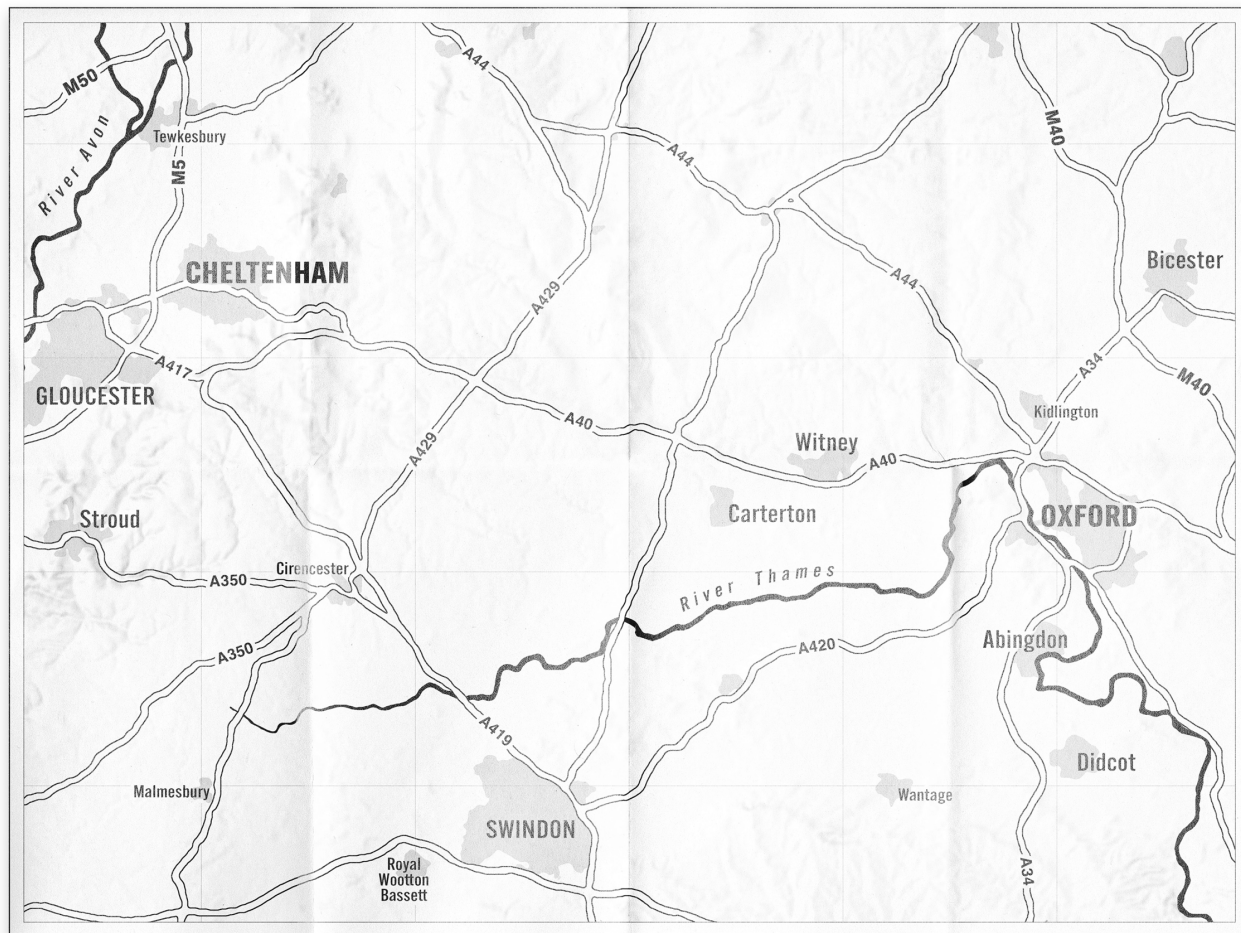


HOMework

A MEMOIR



GEOFF DYER



Homework

A MEMOIR



Geoff Dyer



Farrar, Straus and Giroux
New York

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In loving memory

Phyllis 'Mary' Dyer (1925–2011)

Arthur 'John' Dyer (1919–2011)

and Eric Bartlett (1919–1993)

and to

Daryl James and Bob Beale



‘... not only the local memories, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood: of delighted absorption in our own world, from which, eventually, in the course of growing up, we are distanced and separated, so that it and the world become things we observe ... For what is at issue, in all these cases, is a growth and alteration of consciousness: a history repeated in many lives and many places which is fundamentally an alteration of perception and relationship. What was once close, absorbing, accepted, familiar, internally experienced becomes separate, critical, changing, externally observed ... Great confusion is caused if the real childhood memory is projected, unqualified, as history.’

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

‘I made a mental map and located myself upon it.’

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*



If I close my eyes I can see it now, that dear old house
on Memory Lane . . .

‘the effect upon me of my early life...’
Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’



1 Fairfield Walk

We lived here – my mum, dad and me – from 1958, the year I was born, until 1970 when I was eleven. My mum was proud of the fact that we lived in an end-terrace house and so were effectively in an unusually extended semi-detached. Even without that enhancing increment of status it was a glamorous terrace. The bricks on the east-facing fronts of all the houses were glazed and in places this glazing was pocked with spider-web cracks: the result of gunfire from the Second World War. The Germans had not only succeeded in crossing the Channel; they had somehow advanced all the way to Gloucestershire, right up Fairhaven Street to the frontline of Fairfield Walk. Even if that is historically questionable it shows how close to home the war was in the consciousness of any boy growing up in the 1960s.

At the back of the houses was a lane with a wide ridge of grass in the middle and weeds at the edges. Halfway along, this unpaved lane met another, similarly puddled, running perpendicular to it, between Fairfield Avenue and Fairfield Park Road. This was where kids from all the nearby Fairfields converged and played. If the war at the front of the houses was in the past, here in the lanes, on the far side of history, it continued unabated. Unsupervised by adults, all our games were war-related. Although overwhelmingly Second World War-derived, the weaponry was ahistoric, sourced from the Wild West of cowboys (six-shooters, holsters) and Indians (bows and arrows, with suckers instead of sharp points), the Crusades (swords, shields, an assortment of plastic armour) and contemporary espionage: James Bond, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Everything which in wartime had been metal was, in our version, remoulded in plastic. I owned both a black plastic Tommy gun and, like many of my friends, a green plastic helmet. Since these helmets protected us from injury it was acceptable to cosh Keith Williams over the head – over his plastic helmet – with my Tommy gun. His helmet did its job, he was unharmed, but the barrel of my gun snapped off and was left hanging from the plastic khaki strap connecting it to the simulated wood-grain of the plastic stock. A coveted weapon had been reduced to bits of angled plastic, one dangling from the other. I was fine but with my gun mortally injured had to return with it to the dressing station called home. My dad glued the gun back together later that evening but thereafter it was fragile – more fragile than it had been before it broke – and had to be handled with a delicacy unsuited to the demands of battle. The war raged on regardless, with a resolve that extended Churchill's speech about fighting on the beaches and the landing grounds into the arena first of processed food and then natural vegetation. When our Sekiden pistols ran out of ammunition we used frozen peas instead of silver pellets; when these got jammed, because of the peas becoming mushy, we made do with sweater-piercing darts: green chevrons of wally barley that grew in swaying clumps at the lane's edges.

While the lane was a kind of no man's land in the sense that it was the almost exclusive preserve of kids, the one conflict that had no place in our games was the First World War. Always present in the realm of memory and relatives – Gary Hunt's grandad regularly dropped his trousers to show us the gouged pink scars of shrapnel wounds from the Somme – it was entirely absent from the field of play, the lane of fire. Rather than a war with clearly defined sides and goals the ongoing and unwinnable conflict in which we were engaged was a swirl of shifting allegiances in which prisoners were abruptly released, the wounded recovered instantly, and the dead came back to life in minutes, often taking up arms on behalf of the side that had killed them. Whereas in actual war getting shot, wounded, captured or killed were the worst things that could befall a soldier, these were the experiences most actively sought. We *wanted* to be killed, to roll over and (briefly) die, felt cheated if denied this ultimate proof of full participation in the life of combat. Some uncamouflaged civilian vehicles – mauve Triumph Herald, blue Ford Anglia – splashed slowly through the amphibious puddles but with so little traffic there was no chance of anyone coming to grief. Grazed knees and occasional tears were a minor inconvenience – signs of realism as handkerchief bandages and imagined dressings were applied by girls – and all games were marked by a chaotic lack of malice. The

constant noise – shouted orders, cries for ammo, vocalised explosions, the phlegmy rat-a-tat-tat of automatic fire – was audible proof of a deeper tranquillity than could ever be conveyed by silence. To be at war was to be in a state of actively maintained peace, steeped in the contentment of a shared love of all things martial.

Adults eventually came out to call a truce for the night and sound the retreat indoors. Brothers – in arms – went home together, to more games with their siblings; I went home to my mum and dad, to play with my toy soldiers.

It was all more sedate in our front garden with its square of daisy-sprinkled lawn, bordered by flowers on three sides, frequently mown, and flattened with a heavy roller.* We still had fights, of course. A slide shows blond-haired Keith and me in a paddling pool with red brick-effect sides, afloat in the Kodachrome green lawn, squirting bubbly water at each other from Fairy Liquid containers. Life took some camera-less pictures of my mum and me playing two-against-one badminton with my dad. The toy racquets were so loosely strung that our game came instantly to a halt whenever the rubbery shuttlecock, instead of bouncing off the strings, became silently stuck in them like a captured creature. We'd all look around, momentarily bewildered by the sudden stalling of time.

Because it was an end-house there was an additional strip of land – a concrete path with a narrow band of plants by the dark and knotty fence – at the side of the house. This had no function except to keep the road at bay. The fence, about five feet high, was regularly creosoted by my dad, a passionate creosoter, as devoted to creosoting that fence as he was to applying red oxide to the frame of the homemade swing in our back garden. (Maybe that was part of its function too; it existed in order to be creosoted.) From the road Gary and I threw worn-out tennis balls at the side-wall of the house – a window-less cliff of brick – and caught them on the rebound. This game only got going after – would not have been possible during – the fortunately brief spell following my dad's being made redundant from Gloster Aircraft Company, when he worked nights at British Nylon Spinners and slept during the day. As we threw the ball higher and higher the game ascended and evolved into something more ambitious: trying to throw the ball so that it would land in and come down the chimney, like a form of extreme basketball. We never managed it, though if we *had* then the ball, blackened from re-entry, would have left sooty smudges as it ricocheted around either the inhabited living room or the pristine front room. A similar failure took place when John Buday and I tried to shoot birds with his wonky air rifle. We didn't hit a single bird – a shame as we were desperate to kill something – just as I failed to snare one after setting up a rudimentary trap on our front lawn, unaware, at that stage, of the atavistic urge behind this impulse. The trap consisted of an inverted sieve, propped up by a supporting stick connected by a length of string to my hide in the porch. When the birds were lured there by a bait of seeds I jerked the supporting stick away – but they never were lured (because they had more experience of the science of entrapment than I did?). I kept watch for a long time that might actually have been quite short and then, as happens in childhood, lost interest. A more successful trap, in the yard at the back of the house, comprised a jar filled with water and jam, attracting wasps which then drowned. But what was the point? A measure intended to reduce the threat from wasps attracted them in a way the bird trap never did. Perhaps schemes like these were an etiolated expression or domesticated residue of the prehistoric instinct to hunt, trap and kill. In the era of convenience foods, such an instinct served no purpose but it was in my blood. My dad's father was a market gardener, but *his* dad had been a bird-catcher. That sounds like an occupation from Hardy's Wessex, one of many ties – bloodlines, almost – connecting us to a life further south and west, older and more rustic than ours.

The house was a two-up, two-down. Upstairs were two bedrooms, mine and my parents', and a bathroom. There was an extra toilet outside in the yard at the back of the house, next to the coal shed. From December to March this toilet was out of action because my dad turned off the water and drained the cistern to prevent the pipes from freezing: the plumbing equivalent of creosoting the fence, further proof that the elements had it in for us. One day every year flying ants appeared, apparently from this outside toilet. It was like a scaled-down, terraced version of a crop-threatening medieval plague. We killed them off by pouring boiling water on them. I say that, but since we would not have been allowed access to boiling water with all the potential for maiming ourselves maybe we just *refreshed* them with hot water.

Downstairs was a front room that was almost never used, overlooking the front garden, and a living room with a square, highly varnished, dark brown, extendable dining table (over-used, partly because the

kitchen was too small for a table). My dad washed and shaved every evening in the kitchen, the red washing-up bowl becoming grey with suds and tiny splinters of beard. He washed his ears by pushing a finger into each and then withdrawing the finger with sufficient force to make a popping sound, so clearly audible to me that it must have been explosively loud for him. He kept his shirt on during the whole operation, folding the collar inside the shirt to keep it dry. The stick of shaving soap – simultaneously a snow-softened mountain and a much-licked but unmeltable ice cream – and brush with which this was applied to his face were like prospects and totems of distant manhood. The razors were not thrown away but recycled back into their box, to be used by my mum to shave her shins after which they were *still* not thrown out. Their functional life was ended but they had some as yet undiscovered potential use even if they were so blunt as to have rendered suicide almost impossible. Given sufficient determination you could have attempted to saw away at your wrists but the effort and time involved would have reawakened a sense of purpose synonymous with the will to live.

The house was small so it might seem that my parents tried to maximise space by cramming as many activities as possible into each part of it, but while the effect of this was to make two rooms (kitchen, living room) seem more cramped, the front room was left to bask in its own emptiness.

It was, in this respect, a trophy or show room. *What* it showed – even if that entirely passive function was diminished by the way that no one even looked at it – was that we had more space than we needed, at least until we had to move to somewhere larger, because of a lack of space. Since there was no practical reason why we lived like this it's necessary to look for some kind of psychological explanation, either that or venture still further from the realm of physical space into metaphysics or religion. Reluctant to accept that the room just happened to be unused, what might an anthropologist from outer space have concluded? That it was preserved in such a way because it was a site of ancestral worship or a residual prayer room, made redundant by the way that we believed in no gods except the Football Pools and E.R.N.I.E. (Premium Bonds), but still maintained by convention and habit?

I ventured in there sometimes, always feeling like an intruder, conscious of the contained force of its redundancy. It was obviously nicer than the room we did use and had a better view through the small sash window (of the daisy-flecked front lawn), but, because of its unused-ness there was no point staying in it (nothing to do there) and so its strange negative power was reinforced, the tradition of non-use carried on even by me. It was also amplified or presided over by the things *in* the room. The armchairs and sofa comprising the brown three-piece suite had no real purpose in life; sitting there, waiting to be sat in, they had the effect of making the room seem crowded with emptiness. Robbed of the function for which they were manufactured, they had no choice but to adapt, to assume the plumped aspect of comfy altars. But the real altar, the place of intensified redundancy, was the cocktail cabinet.

In its modest fashion this cabinet resembled Thunderbirds HQ in the way the top slid smoothly back to reveal a canyon floor of glasses, the larger ones with fox-hunting scenes on their inverted sides: red-coated riders, jolly hounds. The front doors were locked but the little key was always in its lock, emphasising that we were simultaneously on the threshold of the forbidden and already within the realm of the symbolic. When the doors were opened there stood a crowded array of green and clear bottles: gin, whisky, Cinzano Bianco, Babycham. These were less appealing to me than the two rows of four, red-topped metal cocktail sticks, resting vertically within narrow blocks of wood stuck to the inside of each door. When these sticks were removed you could spear one of the cocktail cherries in their jar. *Could* but almost never did. My mum did not drink and my dad only had an occasional beer or a blue-moon glass of homemade wine. Across the Atlantic at this time, and in other homes throughout the UK, people were opening cabinets like this and using them, reaching in and taking out bottles, pouring drinks from bottles, mixing drinks, *drinking* drinks. The lifespan of our drinks exceeded all reasonable and seasonal expectations of survival. Some bottles were never opened (the Babycham), those that were remained in a semi-vegetative state, stuck for years in what was, depending on their mind-set, either a half-full or half-empty kind of death-in-life. So there it was, in the unused room, the unused cocktail cabinet: another visible reminder that we had got a toe-hold in the age of plenty, had more than we needed. That was a way of looking backwards, of gauging progress made since the 1930s when everything was in short supply. But the front room and cocktail cabinet were also future-oriented in the same way that the tombs of the pharaohs were full of stuff that might come in handy in the after-life. My mum had grown up as a Methodist; my dad's only feelings towards religion were of rumbling, low-level suspicion consistent with his overall view of the world. Life, as far as he was concerned, ended the moment you died. But the idea of the after-life is not so easily dispensed with; in his case it had moved forward into the current life, taken up residence in that part of it which always had to be prepared for and guarded against. The hard and hazardous times that lay ahead at some unpredictable point in the

future meant that any part of the present life had to be subordinated, more or less like a secular version of the Christian ideal, to the life to come, the difference being that whereas the Christian after-life had a guaranteed start date (death), this pre-after-life of my dad's was constantly deferred right up until the moment (also death) it ceased to exist, whereupon its saturation of the actual life was complete.

On one evening every other year something extraordinary happened: the front room was *used*. One year, on Boxing Day, my dad's sister Auntie Dink and her husband Uncle Eric would host a gathering of relatives at their house in Shurdington; the following year they all came to ours, *to our front room*. How the room must have looked forward to this biannual coming-into-being, this social resurrection from – or, more accurately, within – the empty tomb of itself.

The same people were always there, at both houses: Dink and Eric and their children, Ian and Ann (who were, respectively, thirteen and six years older than me), my dad's other sisters, Lean (and her husband Harry and daughter Lynette) and Joan (unmarried).^{*} Eric's brother Marce and his wife, Iris, also came, along with my mum's half-sister Rhoda (always known as Yo after my early attempts to pronounce her name came out as Yo-Yo), her husband, Daryl, and, when she was old enough, their daughter, Tina, a couple of years younger than me but the only cousin even close to my age. I think that was it, at least until Lynette married Terry (local) and Ann married Don (from London). My dad's brother, Jim, and his wife, Peg, may have come but, since I can't picture them, I'll assume they didn't.

They were lovely, these Boxing Day get-togethers in the front room, with the Christmas tree reflecting on its symbolic and decorative value in the dark window. As an only child I was given lots of presents to unwrap on Christmas morning – my parents said it was one of the advantages of not having brothers or sisters – and then, when the relatives arrived on Boxing Day, I was given even more. The thrill of the previous day's presents had already worn off by then – literally in the case of my *Fireball XL5*, a toy replica of the spacecraft from the Gerry and Sylvia Anderson puppet series on telly. It was a sleek dull grey, brightened by the colourful decals or transfers that I added to the fins and the area round the cockpit. Rather than just hold it in – and move it through – the air to simulate flight it was more fun to manoeuvre this aerodynamically implausible craft through the branches and lights of our Christmas tree. The impulse was the same one that leads wing-suit flyers to reject the relative safety of jumping from planes into empty sky in favour of highly dangerous proximity flying, speeding past cliffs and skimming over trees. After a few passes through the spiky and alien vegetation of the Christmas tree the transfers, recently perfect, had been scratched to shreds. The rocket remained physically intact, was functionally unimpeded, but this cosmetic damage meant that it had been ruined within hours of its launch.

Aside from the haul of extra presents, the best thing about these Boxing Day gatherings – the highlight of the evening – was playing cards, Newmarket, for actual money, stored in a brass tin. A slightly strange transaction, this, in that people bought this stored money with ... money! At the end of the evening winners could cash out and convert their heavy haul of pennies, threepenny bits and sixpences back into the larger denominations – shillings, half crowns – they'd brought to the Fairfield casino. Halfway through the cards session there was a break for food: John West salmon sandwiches, pinky-grey ham, leftover turkey, pickled onions on festive paper plates, followed by cake, homemade mince pies, and nuts (never seen except at Christmas). It was also an evening of drinking: port and lemonade, yellowy Warninks Advocaat (also heavily diluted with lemonade), shandy (ditto), beer and homemade wine. My mum stuck to tea while my dad had a Mackeson or Chelt, the locally brewed pale ale, sometimes one of each. No one drank spirits but the uncles all got stuck in to the homemade wine. Wheat, barley, potato – the source vegetable was irrelevant; whatever it was there was always more and the more of it there was the more everyone liked it.^{*}

Although she was a non-drinker my mum seemed pleased with the way that other people's drinking affected the mood. 'He's merry,' she'd say of Uncle Eric or, no less fondly, of Uncle Harry: 'Oh, he's a *fool*!' What she most liked, though, was cleaning up. It wasn't that she was impatient for people to be gone so that she could begin clearing stuff away; she'd be doing this throughout the evening, quite happily, despite my dad's urging – 'Sit down, Mary' – in the way that an equally concerned husband might, in different circumstances, suggest to a tipsy wife that she go easy on the G&Ts. Even among our closest relatives, on the funnest night of the year, she felt most at home – whether we were at Eric and Dink's or Fairfield Walk – in the kitchen, working, serving and cleaning.

My friend Keith lived two doors away at number 3. We were always round at each other's houses but then

his mum went mental. As she was hanging her washing on the line in the back garden she shouted across the fence at our neighbour, Lola, asking her what was so funny. One funny thing was that Lola wasn't there, her garden was empty. Our garden was full, of me and Keith, playing on the swing, so when his mum kept asking what was so funny, my mum sent us inside. In the afternoon Keith's dad came round and asked if Keith could have tea with us that evening. A couple of mornings later Keith's mum was out in the back garden again, shouting at Lola who, this time, was hanging out *her* washing, to mind her own bloody business. Something about laundry, especially hanging it out to dry, seemed to activate these bouts of what we would now call paranoia and it's impossible to rule out the effects of the constant prompting by adverts on TV to achieve a whiter and whiter wash with products whose names – Breeze, Tide, Surf – promised a life of oceanic freedom so at odds with the routine drudgery of using them that some kind of schizophrenic breakdown seemed inevitable. Also, we kids had colds constantly and though the era of nutritional convenience was already upon us, disposability was not. We never used tissues, only handkerchiefs that were routinely stiff with yellow snot. These had to be washed, by hand in my mum's case and, unless I'm misremembering, by all the other mums on our street. Encrusted filth and absolute cleanliness went hand in hand.

Lola finished hanging out her sheets – in the breeze, they swelled like sails – and retreated inside.

'Ah, I know what you're like,' Keith's mum shouted, turning the other way now, to Bruno's garden at number 4. We could hear her even when she was hidden from view by Lola's sheets. 'I bloody know you!' she shouted. 'I've bloody seen you looking like that, don't think I haven't.' I had never heard anyone say bloody so much. She was going to get arrested if she wasn't careful. 'I've bloody seen you as well. You think you're looking at me, well I can look too, yes, I can bloody look.' She went on like this for ages.

At tea my mum told my dad what had gone on. I was hoping they would have a long talk about it but he seemed only to want to eat his chips.

'Is Keith's mum mental?' I asked.

'No, and you mustn't say that,' said my mum.

'What's wrong with her then?'

'She's just a bit soft in the head.'

'Does that mean she's mental?'

'No, she's just not very well. She imagines a lot of things.'

'What sort of things does she imagine?'

'She imagines people are taking the mickey out of her.'

'But she's not imagining that. We do take the mickey out of her.'

'Well, you shouldn't.'

'Will she be locked up in Coney Hill?' Coney Hill was the local mental home. Its name, like much else in my childhood, harked back to Hardy – 'Yea, the coneys are scared' – and it popped up so frequently in conversations and stories as to suggest that being sent there was a perpetual possibility, even likelihood. In a relatively benign, west-country way this functioned as deterrent and warning. On the one hand: keep using the latest advances in washing powders, detergents and fabric conditioners to achieve whiter and whiter washes; on the other, the threatened darkness of incarceration in the psychiatric burrows of Coney Hill. This threat was also internalised and articulated as a kind of appeal by the mums themselves who, in periods of stress, said, 'I'll end up in Coney Hill at this rate.'

'No, she won't be locked up,' said my dad. 'She'll probably just go to hospital for a little while.'

'She says bloody a lot.'

'She doesn't know what she's saying.'

'Bloody is a very bad word, isn't it?'

'Yes, so I don't want to hear you saying it.'

'Why is it a bad word?' I said, cutting a ketchup-drenched fish finger with my fork.

'Hold your knife and fork properly,' said my mum. 'And don't keep asking your father questions.'

'I only want to know why it's a bad word.'

'It just is,' she said.

'But what does it mean?'

'It doesn't mean anything, I don't want to hear you say it and that's the end of it,' said my dad. He was always saying that something was the end of something, and perhaps there had been a time, when he was growing up, before the Second World War, when that had been the case, but those days were coming to an end and maybe he was beginning to sense that.

'And I don't want you talking to Keith and taking the mickey out of his mum.'

‘Yes, Dad,’ I said, looking down at my fish fingers. I hated fish fingers and I hated getting told off.

‘He won’t do that, Jack. He knows you mustn’t mock the afflicted, don’t you, Geoff?’

‘Yes,’ I said, even though at school the next day everyone was taking the mickey out of Keith about his mum, chanting ‘She’s going to Coney Hill’ in his face.

‘You mustn’t mock the inflicted,’ I said, once, before joining in, repeatedly. And we were right. A few days later I was in Jackson’s, one of two local corner shops, buying sherbet flying saucers, when she claimed that Mr Jackson had given her the wrong change.

‘You can’t bloody fool me,’ she shouted. ‘I know your thieving game. You think you’re that bloody clever, well I can tell you I’m going to get the police. There’s a law against that.’ Hoping to placate her, Mr Jackson gave her the money she said she was owed but this conciliatory gesture failed to mollify her. ‘Keep your bloody money, I don’t bloody want it,’ she said, picking up her change and tossing it, underarm and harmlessly, in the direction of the Rice Krispies and Shredded Wheat.

Mr Williams came home early from work that afternoon and no one saw his wife again for three weeks. He said she’d gone to stay with her sister but everyone knew where she was: Coney Hill.

Across the street from Jackson’s was another corner shop, Hunt’s (no relation to Gary who lived on Naunton Crescent). We were in and out of these shops the whole time, buying sweets, crisps, snacks. Jackson’s also sold groceries but only the sweets and ice-lollies were of interest. Which meant that Hunt’s, although offering a more limited range of goods – cakes, sweets and lollies – was perfectly adapted to our needs. Milky Bars, Aeros, packaged pastilles and so on were available on the counter, but the sweets stored in big glass jars on shelves behind the counter held a special allure: a foretaste of the bottles of spirits stacked up behind bars. Mr Hunt was rarely to be seen; the shop was run by an ancient-looking woman called Mrs Chambers. After tea one day my parents sent me there to buy ice cream for pudding: Peach Melba or Raspberry Ripple, they said. Neither was in stock so I blew the entire budget on packs of sweet cigarettes which came with cards illustrating episodes in the life of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who, on this evidence, had plenty to contend with. I knew I shouldn’t have done this so was not surprised when, a few minutes after getting home, I found I had something to contend with too. I was marched back to the shop by my unmounted dad, still clutching the stash of sweet cigarettes, to get a refund. My dad was surprised and disappointed (that word will come up again later in another retail context) that Mrs Chambers had allowed me to buy such a vast quantity of these things: the moral equivalent of selling glue or knives to kids today.

The normally reliable supply of ice creams, lollies and frozen Tip Tops from these two shops did nothing to subdue the excitement generated, on hot afternoons, by the swirling tune of an ice-cream van wending its way through the streets. The ice-cream man was a child-friendly addition to the various tinkers, blade sharpeners and insurance men who regularly made their way through the neighbourhood, all of whom knocked on the front door, unlike visiting relatives and coal men who came, unannounced, straight to the back. As soon as we heard that innocent ice-cream music there would be a scramble for money, for change, and we – the neighbourhood kids, rarely accompanied by adults – would flock to his open window.

More exciting – and, in a way, better – were the times when I got out of the house too late and found the sun-dazzled street empty except for some kids licking their cones and a few others like me, disconsolate coins in hand, looking around. Even now, sixty years later, Keats’s line, ‘Fled is that music,’ makes me think not of a nightingale but a gaggle of kids standing, waiting, listening. When the tell-tale sound of the noncey tune resumed, faintly, from several streets away, we’d tear off in the direction of Langdon Road or Naunton Lane: a short-trousered posse in hot pursuit of the fugitive ice-cream man.

When Mrs Williams came back she often ignored people in the street but she no longer swore or accused anyone of cheating her out of change or of looking at her – which was surprising because everyone looked at her more than before, because of the strange rabbit-like look in her eyes.

At school we soon forgot about her. It was such a rich time for learning that we had plenty of new words, new insults, to absorb, many of them derivatives or amplifications of the default derogation: spastic or its diminutive, spaz.

‘You’re a homo,’ an older boy told me in the playground one day, without prelude or provocation. I had no idea what he meant but could tell it had not been intended as a compliment.

‘What’s a homo?’ I asked Gary, the leading authority on all the latest words making the rounds at school.

After a pause long enough to suggest that he himself was in unfamiliar linguistic territory, he gave his verdict.

‘It’s a double spastic,’ he said.

That school was Naunton Park (infants, junior and secondary), a five-minute walk from Fairfield Walk. I don’t know what the exact catchment area was but nearly everyone lived close by. No one was driven to school, partly because there were relatively few cars, but also because, in addition to lanes like the one at the back of our house, many of the surrounding streets were connected by short-cuts, alleys and cut-throughs hidden at the end of no-through streets, so that a time-saving pedestrian web was woven into the structural fabric of the neighbourhood. My mum’s half-sister, Yo, came to live with us in 1958, when she was eighteen, because my mum was ill with pre-eclampsia after giving birth to me. She met her future husband, Daryl, who lived on Ewlyn Road, accessible from our house via an ingenious little pedestrian chicane which led, in turn, to the alley tucked by the side of Emmanuel Church, running right up to the school. Daryl and his family had all been at Naunton Park. I started there in 1963. My mum began working in the school canteen as a dinner lady in 1967, while I was in the juniors, and stayed on till 1983.

The three schools were part of a single red-brick building, with large playgrounds, fronted by low spiked railings. As well as the playgrounds the school had the benefit of Naunton Park itself, bordered by allotments, alms houses, ornamental gardens and the school canteen. Up by the allotments were large swings which we urged each other to jump off at higher and higher points of the arc. The main focus of our attention was at the other end of the park, near school, a place we called the Hump: a mound of compacted dirt with trees growing out of it – all that was left, presumably, of the land that had been cleared and flattened to form the rec. Before school one morning we all went down there to gawp at something extraordinary that had appeared overnight: a brown tent pitched in the shade of the Hump. We kept getting closer, ready to throw stones, then scattered when a ragged tramp emerged. By lunchtime there was no sign of him or his tent.

Within the school itself, as a way of accommodating the expanding population of pupils, a new, modern building called a ‘terrapin’ was added, in a corner of the playground. This looked temporary, provisional – inevitably, since the school itself had the local permanence of generations and ages. The terrapin was suspended on concrete blocks, leaving a gap of about a foot between the floor and the ground. The gap was just big enough to be filled by rumour. Under the influence of an unlikely convergence of Enid Blyton’s *Secret Seven* books and contemporary news reports (which we had somehow absorbed without having watched or read any) a group of us got it into our heads that beneath the terrapin, amidst all the other junk left over from its construction, was a stash of purple hearts. We didn’t know what purple hearts were but, after school one afternoon, three of us crawled under to investigate. It was dirty work, wriggling around on our hands and knees – unrewarding too. There was nothing purple or heart-shaped, but such is the imaginative persistence of childhood and the sheer fascination of any space lacking a designated function, especially one that is outlawed (we’d been told not to do exactly what we were doing), that we were sure *something* was going on down there. Even though there was nothing of interest it retained the illicit pull of grim and dusty possibility. We went back in, back under, the next afternoon and then abandoned the search, like miners returning from a broken strike: undefeated, convinced we had been right, somehow thwarted by circumstance. Not that it mattered. Something else, a new craze, came along and distracted us. In the autumn this meant conkers.

The fun of conkers started with finding them and accumulating as many as possible. Actually, it started *before* that, with the knowledge that it was conker season – but how did this knowledge communicate itself to us except by someone having found the season’s first conkers? Conker-hunting was a mission in itself, a precursor to the annual hunt for magic mushrooms of my early twenties. Lying beside the soft green spiky shells on the soggy pavement and spilling out onto the wet tarmac of Naunton Lane, the conkers’ brown gleam – a hard, contained radiance – made them seem the newest things in creation, newer even than the latest toy or car. Some shells contained two conkers, each companionably flat on the side facing its twin. The biggest were the size of golf balls or middle-weight tomatoes. Every year we learned that the biggest conker was not necessarily the best – the most resilient, the toughest – but it took a while, each year, for the association of size with power to wear off.

Most kids used a meat skewer to drive a hole through a conker for the string or old shoelace it would be attached to. Worried that I’d bayonet not only the conker but also the palm of my hand, my dad drilled neat holes through my competing conkers, thereby preserving more of their strength. Rumours abounded, the most common being that a certain conker had been strengthened by being pickled in vinegar – the

equivalent of doping except that while frowned upon (by kids who did not yet know that expression), the practice was not outlawed.

The scoring system was universally agreed and accepted. A winning conker took on the accumulated score of a defeated conker so it was possible, after only one bout, to inherit a massive backlog of unfought victories. There was little incentive for a battered high-scoring conker to risk that tally against a new resilient conker which would add only a couple of points to a score already over a hundred, so, as in professional boxing, part of the skill was in arranging matches most likely to enhance or preserve your score and reputation. (And as with horse-racing it was never clear what proportion of victory was due to the player and what to the conker; at their best, for a brief period player and conker were one.) Occasionally, in a playground full of conker-playing, there were unifying bouts as two vulnerable but high-scoring conkers and players went head to head, watched by a small crowd.

‘Obbly obbly onk, my first conk.’

‘Obbly obbly ack, my first crack.’

With these words – passed down, from generation to generation, since the days of William the Conqueror – the contest was under way. There was an assumption that the aggressor inflicted damage on the passively dangling conker, so the harder you hit the better, but the main things to be hurt were players’ fingers when the strings became entangled.

‘Tangle tangle, one two three!’

Whoever shouted that first got the next hit, incentive and proof that it was best to be on the attack. It was just as likely that the attacking conker harmed itself but this never occurred to us – had it done so the whole enterprise would have been rendered pointless. One well-attended heavyweight contest between Jeremy Hartwell and John Moxey became literally pointless as their two conkers – big-scoring but vulnerable and past their best – destroyed each other, wiping out both of their accumulated scores, and thereby radically depleting the communal total. In a *MAD* instant these two duffle-coated, once-powerful kids were left with empty shoelaces dangling from their hands, while the top conker in schoolyard civilisation – moments earlier something epic, in the hundreds, now a mere 22-er or some such – was to be found elsewhere, in the playground’s unwatched and low-scoring fringes. A lesson was at work here about competition, community and continuity.

After a brief season of conkers there would be no more conkers. Interest in playing evaporated at the same time that the supply of new conkers dried up, without friction or regret, and another craze engulfed the playground in the breaks between lessons.

It’s the continuity that’s important, the way the phases remained essentially the same, irrespective of the seasonal variations or new iterations of a given activity. So while new series of bubblegum cards kept appearing, the business of collecting and swapping remained unchanged. We gathered in little negotiating huddles in the playground, taking turns to flick expertly through our sets while a potential swapper kept up the rapid accompanying commentary – ‘Got, got, got’ – broken by an occasional, excited ‘NEED!’ Once the needs had been set aside the process was reversed and the kid who had expressed his interest, his need, would rifle through what he had to offer in exchange. Sometimes the result was a simple one-to-one swap, but through the multiple transactions and negotiations at work in the course of the day an overall exchange rate emerged whereby a given card acquired a more or less standardised value. There was a degree of variation according to how badly an individual needed a particular card, but exceptional transactions like this had a knock-on effect and were thereby incorporated into the volatile workings of the market as a whole.

These cards – large, made of stiff cardboard, accompanied by an unwanted strip of pink bubblegum – were commercially motivated offshoots of TV series (*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*: black and white), films (*Thunderball*: also black and white) and pop groups or, more precisely, the TV series or films built around the Monkees (colour) or the Beatles (black and white). Brooke Bond tea cards emanated from a loftier realm of intention; as such they were collected privately, at home, rather than swapped – or at least swapping was an incidental rather than defining part of their function. This fitted easily, companionably, with the self-sufficient habits of the only child.

Every packet of loose-leaf tea came with a card and every box with two (in a little cellophane packet), part of a series of fifty, with the subject series changing every six months. On the back of each card was a description of and information about whatever was shown on the front, and each series could be glued in an album or displayed on a wallchart. I always chose the album (private, mine) rather than the chart (public, shared). The first set I remember is *Freshwater Fish*, though that was from 1960, when I was two, so it’s probable that my parents had collected these cards ahead of me. This was followed by *African Wildlife*

(the cover featuring zebra, oryx and impala drinking in their reflections at the edge of a water hole), *Tropical Birds* (a lovely red bird with a pompom), *Asian Wildlife* (tiger), *British Butterflies* (red admiral: a come-down after the last three), *Wildlife in Danger* (turtle), *Wild Flowers* (more colourful but also more boring than *Freshwater Fish*), *Butterflies of the World*, *Wild Birds in Britain* (a robin redbreast), *Transport Through the Ages* (that was more like it: steam train, ocean liner, space rocket), *Trees in Britain* (sounds boring but I loved it), *Flags and Emblems of the World*, *British Costumes* (a triptych cover comprising middle-aged woman from the Middle Ages, Renaissance man looking avant-trans, and chick in a green mini-dress), *History of the Motor Car*, *Famous People* (bit vague and a portent of what was to come?), *The Saga of Ships*, *The Race into Space*, *Prehistoric Animals* (box office, timeless), *History of Aviation*, and *Adventurers and Explorers*.

I have no recollection of *The Sea: Our Other World*, so by 1974 I must have grown out of collecting these even though as a family we remained loyal to the tea. It's possible that I'd lost interest years earlier and that my parents, from whom I had apparently inherited *Freshwater Fish*, went on collecting the last few series as a way of extending my childhood, of trying to collect evidence to keep at bay the truth that I had become a surly sixteen-year-old whose attention could only have been held by a series called *Pub Signs of England* or *Great Lagers of the World*.

Now, of course, I look back on these albums with as much fondness as my parents could ever have done. Arnoldian or Reithian in spirit, they are reminders of how *educational* British life was back then. That was the declared purpose of *Look and Learn*, an illustrated weekly magazine that first appeared in 1962; tea cards achieved the same aim incidentally, as a kind of intended side-effect. You bought tea, a drink, and learned something – about trees, animals or flags – with an enthusiasm that needed no encouraging. Quite the opposite. As a concession to my eagerness I was allowed to slit the green outer packet and extract the card before the teas were stored in the pantry. 'This series of cards is offered in the interests of education by Brooke Bond.' There was a touching, down-home quality to this educational initiative in the service of brand loyalty. (At the back of *The Saga of Ships* album a section of recommended 'Further Reading' cautioned that 'some of these books may be out of print but your local public library should be able to obtain copies'.) There was also a perfect balance between the local and the global as series featuring *British* birds or butterflies alternated with world-wide surveys of the same. Someone might even now be writing a thesis on how these cards fostered a neo-colonialist view of the world (they came, after all, with tea, as pure a product of empire as any that existed) with a disproportionate emphasis on Britain's role in world history, but a case could be made for the opposite argument. For while we had some nice home-grown birds and although it was impressive that our small island had enough butterflies to sustain an entire album of them, there was no mistaking the fact that the best birds and butterflies were to be found elsewhere. It enlarged our view of things in the way that the World Cup did with footballers. Even by name our default butterfly, the cabbage white, fared poorly in the face of the rainbow alliance of overseas specimens. The same was true with our diligent but dull British birds – scraping a living, dependent on hand-outs of stale bread in the harsh and leafless winters – compared to the extravagant plumage and luxuriant colours of their tropical brothers and sisters basking in the abundant foliage of the rainforests of Africa or South America. And at a time when the ideal of the great white hunter was still being celebrated on TV these tea cards formed an introduction to the idea of conservation.

So, by collecting cards you also collected knowledge. I was about to claim that I can still identify trees by virtue of *Trees in Britain* but, as I study the cover of this, the sole surviving album – where did the others get to? what happened to them? – I'm unable to fit the multitude of names flickering vaguely through my head to the trio of trees on view. The only one I can be certain of is a horse chestnut (because of conkers), but at least one of the things we learned through these cards stayed learned, namely the pleasures of ... collecting! By the time of *Wild Birds of Britain* (1965) and *Transport Through the Ages* (1966) when I was seven or eight, I had the maturity to know what I was doing: *collecting*! Which makes me wonder: was mine the last generation to collect in earnest? Could it be that future vinyl obsessives were schooled early on in the habits and satisfactions of their compulsion by the experience of collecting cards and then adapted this behaviour to the mature task of hunting down LPs? I remember the pride and speed with which my friend Chris Mitchell responded, in 1984, to my asking how many Miles Davis albums he owned. 'Twenty-three,' he said without a moment's hesitation, with the satisfaction of a boy who has just pasted in the second-to-last card he needs to complete his album of *Flags and Emblems of the World*. A Brooke Bond answer, then, except that while it's impossible ever to have a complete and definitive collection of vinyl or of Miles Davis albums there was a teleological satisfaction in collecting Brooke Bond or other cards: you were finished when you had the set.

We, however, are nowhere near finished with this fascinating topic! Two distinctions need to be made. Between collecting for its own sake and collecting with an ulterior goal in mind. And between collecting and *accumulating* – all those marbles of mine, rattling uncountably in a tin cosmos of Cadbury's Roses – with no fixed goal in mind. One of the petrol companies began offering a lightweight vintage-car card whenever you purchased a certain minimum amount of petrol. After you had collected a full album's worth you could claim a toy vintage car: Dinky or Corgi, I guess. To avoid people claiming their toy twice over, the people at the garage pulled out the central page of the album or put a line through it so that in order to get another card you had to collect another complete album's worth. A friend of my dad's ingeniously got around this by affixing the cards with the aid of fasteners used for the stamps he collected: like this the complete set of cards could be detached unmarked, stuck in a fresh album and traded in for a new car the next time he went to a (different) garage, which would be very soon, since no one bought more than the threshold of petrol required to qualify for a card. We all admired the cunning but in some ways this took the fun out of the whole thing, and despite the short-term satisfactions I see now that it detracted from the incremental purpose of collecting (and, by extension, life).

Although we did not collect badges our hunger for them was immense and – possibly because there was no possibility of completion – insatiable. There were badges for everything. When we passed our cycling proficiency tests we got a certificate and a triangular badge. Esso handed out 'Put a tiger in your tank!' badges featuring stripy tails and grinning tiger faces. We coveted these so intensely that petrol's ability to fuel cars was a side-effect of its capacity to generate badge acquisition. There were even badges for 'Clarks League of Foot Freedom' (shoes), 'Walters Potato Puffs' (snacks), and 'Richmond' (pork sausages).

The most sought-after badges were also the most mysterious. For a brief interlude, maybe just a couple of weeks, a limited supply of rectangular badges saying '67 If' in large letters with another word below – 'Principal' or something like that, in a smaller font – were in circulation. No one knew what they meant or where they came from but everyone wanted one. I was lucky enough to get hold of a green one that read '67 If: Exhibitor', had it pinned to my sweater when, in spite of a bad cough, I went on playing British Bulldog in the playground. The game was such fun and the cough so bad that I puked, swallowed the vomit back down and went on playing. That is the Bulldog spirit, the badge of getting-your-own-back courage.

One year there was a raffle at school. The top prize was a big yellow and red beachball. We all attended the prize-giving with confused and vested interest. The first name drawn out of the hat was Jeremy Hartwell's. He had won third prize – a large bar of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut – and was obviously distressed. Since his name had been read out first didn't that mean he had won the much-coveted beachball? The headmaster clarified the procedure so everyone understood that the next name out of the hat would win second prize. After that had been awarded I had a distinct premonition, years before I even knew the word – so it was a double premonition – that I was going to win. And I did! It was mine, this beautiful floaty thing. We weren't going on holiday that year and so, unlike Keith, who came back from a week in the Isle of Wight as brown as a conker, I didn't get a chance to see the ball in action. I blew it up but my parents said I shouldn't take it outside, because it would burst. Eventually, near the end of the summer, to the delight of my friends, I released this captive ball into the wild, out in the lane. We kicked it and threw it around but it was so big and light there was not much you could do except wait for it to burst – which it promptly did. Within half an hour it had gone from being a bright and buoyant if rather purposeless planet to a tatter of multicoloured plastic: the national flag of a disappointed land whose borders would extend from childhood into adulthood.

The obvious moral of these stories of breaking and bursting – my Tommy gun, the *Fireball XL5* rocket, the beachball – might be that things are transitory, like earthly happiness itself, but that is different to the *lesson*, which is to take better care of your things so that they last longer, so that they can make you happier for longer. (With no brothers and sisters – and no obligation to *share* – the only person to break or lose my things was me.) As with many other aspects of my childhood this fitted in with my parents' policy of safeguarding by minimal usage. It was not just the front room: anything nice was set aside for 'best', though in practice 'best' translated to 'ever' so that we were forever making do with the worn-out, second-rate, used-up or – though the usage only became popular later – the past-its-sell-by-date.

My parents could not swim. So they were full of admiration for Mr Grinnell, a teacher dedicated to making sure that every kid at Naunton Park acquired this skill at the earliest possible age. Once a week a battered

double-decker bus transported us from school to Alstone Baths. These baths bore roughly the same relation to pools at upmarket health clubs that the Victorian workhouse does to a luxury hotel. Alstone Baths opened in 1887 and were, by the 1960s, in an advanced state of disrepair. The clanging, heavily chlorinated acoustic amplified this tale of decline but we did all learn to swim. At a less than uniform pace we progressed from water-winged doggie paddle to a width and then a length (for which a certificate was issued), but the real proof of our increasing aquatic adaptation came in the form of the foot badge known as a verruca.

En route from the wet changing rooms to the pool itself we had to step through disinfectant footbaths intended to prevent the spread of verrucas but it was difficult to avoid the suspicion that this was where we caught them. They were like little aquariums, those footbaths, invisibly swimming with verrucas. Visible horror, on the tiled floors of the changing rooms, came in the form of pink band-aids that had floated off raw heels and toes, and water-bloated cigarette ends. Though they were a source of intense pain it's difficult, now, not to feel a certain fondness for the verruca as the municipal sole of the welfare state.

Back in the changing rooms after our swimming lessons, we had trouble getting our nylon socks back onto our wrinkled, inadequately dried feet. We were in a hurry to get dressed and stuff our wet towels and trunks into our duffel bags because we were all eager to buy the drink from a machine – a hot, sweet, purple-red, slightly frothy blackcurrant-flavoured beverage in a plastic cup – that may have been nothing more exotic than hot Ribena. That looked-forward-to drink at the end of the eagerly awaited swimming lesson was itself a prelude to the real highlight of these outings. On the way back to school the double-decker bus – its roof already dented by the flak of low-hanging branches – had to negotiate a bend at the top of a steep hill. At the moment of maximum precarity, when the bus was tilted over to the left, everyone on the top deck piled into the front left-hand seat in the hope that it would topple over, taking us with it.

The ongoing verruca epidemic and the fact that I was such a sickly child – dreadful eczema, bandaged fingers covered in warts, constantly off school with colds and the numerous other illnesses that childhood is heir to – meant that my parents were always taking me to see either Dr Bracey or Dr Wingate at their surgery on Leckhampton Road, a five-minute walk from home, straight up Fairfield Avenue. Wingate's name alone makes him sound like a figure from the heroic heyday of the NHS. Was he a relative of Orde, devoted to this modest branch of service in Gloucestershire but haunted by the more daring escapades of his great uncle who had led the Chindits in the jungles of Burma? (The person asking this question is the 65-year-old me but those names – Wingate, Burma and Chindits – were part of my consciousness by the time I was twelve.)

There were no appointments, a system my parents greatly preferred because, they said, you could not make an appointment to be ill. Since we didn't have a phone – nor, I think, did any of our neighbours – we'd have had to go there to *make* an appointment anyway so it made more sense to turn up and wait, as we did at the barber. The waiting room was often full of people patiently waiting, in chairs ranged around the edge of the room. At the centre was a massive round table covered with old – never new – magazines, all of which seemed to be *Punch*. These magazines looked like they'd been waiting for so long that there was no realistic hope of ever being read, whereas the chairs, if empty, always seemed ready to prove that they still had a part to play. Overall, even though it had the dispirited look of anywhere devoted exclusively to a function at odds with the desires of everyone in it – to *not* be in it – that room was, if such an expression exists, up on its downers: a sign of the efficient functioning and rude health of the welfare state. Same with Battledown Hospital where I had my tonsils and adenoids out. Architecturally, Battledown offered a medical equivalent of Alstone Baths' seen-better-days aesthetic (the baths at the hospital were all stained with rust) but functionally these *were* better days. I went in with this troublesome pair of appendages and filters – the combined cause, we were told, of all my ear, nose and throat woes – and emerged, a week later, without them (but with a lovely collection of Beatrix Potter books, one of which my mum had brought every time she visited).

At the surgery a jolting buzzer sounded when Dr Bracey was ready to receive the next patient. There were never any disputes about whose turn it was even though no system was established to indicate one's place in the dispersed and randomly seated queue. At Jeremy Hartwell's birthday party, during an energetic derivative of hide-and-seek, I slashed my elbow on broken glass in the shed window I was clambering through. My dad took me to the surgery. There were six people in the waiting room and as soon as they saw my blood-soaked elbow they said, without my dad even asking, that we should go in ahead. When the buzzer sounded we left the waiting room, crossed the hallway and knocked on the doctor's door. Wingate

immediately sent us to the hospital where I had six stitches in my arm. The unburdened NHS worked so efficiently back then that I was able to return to the party in time for ice cream. I still have the scar on my right elbow though it has since been complicated by another scar from another deep cut in the same place, sustained decades later when I lost control of a scooter on a small island in Greece.

Bracey was a chain-smoker; maybe Wingate too, but it's Bracey's smoking I remember. If the sun streamed in through the high, net-curtained windows of his consulting room the clouds of smoke glowed. The remains of his hair were yellow with nicotine. Sat at his desk, cigarette in hand, stethoscope on desk, he exuded an air of impatient and tolerant authority that expressed in miniature a larger relationship of the middle-class professional to the dependent, grateful, faithful and often ignorant patients waiting to see him. Even the smoke in the room was somehow suggestive of a different atmosphere to that in other places.

We went there once because, my dad told him, I was having trouble with my 'toy-oy'.

'What?' snapped Doc Bracey.

'His penis,' my dad confessed under this first bit of cross-examination. It pained him to say this, though on reflection it seems strange that his preferred term was 'toy-oy' since my parents tried to instill in me the belief that it was wrong to play with myself. (If only I'd had the wit back then to ask, 'What am I supposed to do with a toy-oy except play-ay with it?') It was around this time, during one of our war games, that I began imitating the speech of a Japanese officer by saying 'Ah, so...' Nowadays people might say that this was the oral equivalent of pulling one's face into a slanty-eyed expression, but my dad's objection, while no less vehement, was quite different – and somewhat bewildering. I must not say that, must not say 'Ah, so', because it sounded like a 'very rude word', so rude that he wouldn't even reveal what it was.

The absurd timidity of my dad's language with Doc Bracey was directly caused by talking about my penis, a part of the body intimately connected with sex. But a larger hesitancy was induced by the fact that he was talking to someone of a different class. With the sole exception of Auntie Hilda's first husband who, with extravagant urgency sent a *telegram* for my birthday one year, the only middle-class professionals we encountered were doctors. Teachers were just teachers whom we saw every day, human embodiments of the institution called school. But doctors were a different caste altogether, possessed of extraordinary knowledge and power – the power to make you well, or to refer you to people of more specialised knowledge and power: the doctors who arranged to have my warts burned off with something like dry ice at a hospital in Gloucester. Also, for anyone of my parents' generation, they were people to whom unlimited access had only become possible relatively recently, with the founding of the NHS. Bliss was it in that dawn to be unwell! Everything was in abundance. Ointments, tablets, bandages, injections, glasses, prescriptions, operations. We were able to see a doctor for free and the tithe to be paid was simply deference and gratitude. On one occasion my dad plucked up the courage to question a suggested course of treatment, might even have asked about getting a second opinion. I don't remember what the issue was, only that my dad told the story, admiringly, of how peremptory had been Bracey's response, how the stern doctor was vindicated by the way that, after an initial delay, the first course of treatment did indeed begin working. It wasn't just a confirmation of Bracey's individual competence; an entire *relationship* – a social contract – had been affirmed. My parents never glimpsed doctors outside the surgery, socially, at drinks parties (how could they, when they never went to such things?) and there was no inkling, among any parents we knew, that their children might one day *become* doctors. Doctors were there as embodiments of a social landscape in the same way that Leckhampton or Cleeve Hills – visible in the distance, from our garden and Naunton Park – were there as geographical formations. We were happy to be the beneficiaries of their wisdom, even, on occasions, of their incompetence or oversight.

This never changed. In the early 1980s, when my dad had a colostomy, he became very sick for reasons no one could fathom. At a loss as to what might have happened the surgery team opened him up again and found that some gauze had been left inside. He understood, uncomplainingly, even though he had nearly died. I can see him so clearly, sitting up in bed, looking weak, but with a badge pinned proudly to his pyjamas: 'Private Medicine Makes Me Sick'. Still later, to alleviate long-tolerated pain and increasing difficulty walking, he had a hip replacement, after which he never walked properly again. Convinced that the operation had been botched, that it had been performed by an inexperienced junior doctor over the Christmas period, he resigned himself to this less than ideal outcome. It didn't matter that the hip replacement had not worked; what mattered was that he'd had it. Its failure was compounded by the way he made no effort to comply with the regime of physical therapy that is an intrinsic part of operations like this, but that's not how it appeared to him. He said he 'didn't believe in physical therapy', by which he really meant that he didn't believe in himself. So deeply entrenched was respect for the expertise of the medical profession that the idea that outcomes could be self-generated, that treatment could be carried out,

in part, by himself, was entirely alien. He was a willing patient, someone things were done to, not an active participant or collaborator in a process of recovery.

I bought most of my bubblegum cards at Jackson's and Hunt's, corner shops in the accepted and limited sense, but the great corner shop of my childhood, slightly further afield on the corner of Francis Street and Bath Road, was called, with self-crowning simplicity, The Corner Shop. This had everything a boy could want: sweets *and* toys: guns, Airfix models and Airfix soldiers.

The first kit I bought, for reasons that will become clear later, was a Hurricane; the second was a Spitfire and from there I moved on to other fighters: Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk (famous for the snarling teeth insignia), Me 109, Focke-Wulf 190, Mitsubishi Zero ... There was a clear route from these fighters, whose sole feature was a moving propeller (DO NOT CEMENT), to two- or three-seaters like the Avro Anson, the Boulton Paul Defiant (the poetry of aircraft names!), and fragile, ungainly spotters like the Fieseler Storch and the Westland Lysander. Next came light bombers like the de Havilland Mosquito and the Bristol Blenheim (a useless plane but a good kit), followed by the big night bombers: the Lancaster and Halifax, moulded in black plastic with half a dozen crew members, moving gun turrets, opening bomb doors and yellow chevron transfers on the tailfins.

Fighters came in polythene bags stapled to an illustrated card – 'Instructions on Reverse' – which hung from display stands in both the Corner Shop and in Newman's, a more specialised modelling shop further down Bath Road, a few doors along from Fine Fare (my mum's favourite supermarket and the site of her own preferred form of commercially-driven collecting: Green Shield stamps). Bombers were housed in hangar-sized boxes. The Boeing B-29 Superfortress came in the biggest box but the most challenging kit was the slightly smaller B-17 Flying Fortress which my parents gave me for Christmas when I was seven. (I was always happy, even before I had torn off the paper, whenever I heard the tell-tale rattle of parts.) The B-29's near invulnerability to attack made it a boring model: a long silver tube with wings; by contrast the B-17's abundance of vulnerable Perspex gun turrets (along with the insignia of a scantily-clad woman below the cockpit) greatly enhanced its quality as a model.

I made my models badly, in multiple ways: didn't bother filing the parts to make them fit snugly, got glue on bits that were meant to be left unstuck so that propellers didn't spin, undercarriages refused to retract, and cockpit canopies were routinely blurred. At first, instead of painting my planes I just stuck the insignia onto the naked grey plastic (what a pleasure it was to watch the decals slip free in a saucer of lukewarm water before sliding them into place, unripped, drops of water falling from my fingers). When I did begin painting them I was ignorant of the difference between gloss and matt, so the planes often ended up with a high-visibility shine of green-and-brown camouflage.

After I had finished building the planes there was the problem of what to do with them, especially after getting my fingers so badly burned by the *Fireball XL5* disaster. The best bet was to mount them on the Perspex stand, but I often forgot to clear the plastic niche away in advance and so had to prise open the two halves of the fuselage in order to ram the stand in. The only alternative was to hang them from the ceiling by string, leaving me with a view of their wings (sky blue against squares of polystyrene cloud) while the top halves gathered dust invisibly.

Airfix offered a complete childhood vision of a world at war, on land, sea and air. Ships (bit boring) and tanks (the rubber caterpillar tracks were frustratingly difficult to fix together) all poured off the production line, backed up by the 1:72 ground forces that came in boxes with an oblong cellophane window through which it was possible to glimpse a few of the figures inside, arranged randomly on little plastic sprigs. The soldiers were attached to these sprigs by their bases and if, contrary to instructions, you twisted and pulled them free (instead of slicing them off cleanly with a razor) the remaining twist of plastic meant that instead of standing flat they ended up balanced awkwardly on a kind of wobble board.

There were forty-eight figures per set. As well as the expected action poses – firing from kneeling, lying and standing positions, running, marching, crawling, throwing grenades – there were always a few men wounded, dying or surrendering. In addition to the Armies there were various other sets like Cowboys (shiny brown gunslingers, bucking broncos) and Wagon Train (covered wagon, boxes of supplies, women in Victorian dresses). Bright green and slightly ridiculous, the Robin Hood set included one Robin, one Maid Marian, a Friar Tuck and dozens of unnamed extras with bows and staves. In the entire Tarzan set there was basically only one good piece – plus a monkey, a little boy, a few white hunters and hordes of natives. In the interests of completeness, I not only had the massed ranks of the Grenadier Guards (the only interesting piece a man with a sword, stamping his foot) but Civilians and Farm Animals.

These aside, the other sets were issued in such a way that they formed conflicting pairs:

Ancient Britons	Romans
Robin Hood	Sheriff of Nottingham
Confederate Infantry	Union Infantry
Cowboys / Wagon Train	Indians
French Foreign Legion	Arabs
WWI Brits	WWI Germans
WWII British (or Russian) Infantry	WWII German Infantry
Eighth Army	Afrika Korps
US Marines	Japs

This added up, quite literally, to a static dialectic of history: a series of battles between two roughly equal sides. (The Germans were also fighting the Russians but while historically accurate this anomaly made no sense since there was, in our childish conception of the Second World War, no Eastern Front.) Only the costumes varied. In the Airfix version of military history no side was ever outnumbered (there were as many commando raiders as German infantry) and, regardless of the conflict, the casualty rate remained roughly the same: four per cent (two per box). Similarly, although words like bulkhead, fuselage, aileron and undercarriage became part of my vocabulary, there was never any sense of the real purpose of bombers like the Lancaster: to rain death and destruction on the civilian population of Germany.

Airfix represented in miniature a much larger process of reproduction and representation of war that dominated our childhood. The full experience included the 'Gott in Himmel' heroics of Battle Picture Library comics, American equivalents like *Our Fighting Forces* and *G.I. Combat*, bubblegum cards (a series was devoted to winners of the Victoria Cross), TV series such as *The Rat Patrol*, and dozens of films. Some of these were fantastic adventures (*Where Eagles Dare*); others, like *The Dam Busters* (which my mum and I saw at the Coliseum one afternoon, half of a double bill with *Reach for the Sky*), were enhanced retellings of historic events. If the 1969 film *Battle of Britain* succeeded in its big-budget attempt to be true to the historical record that was because it also looked like a full-scale advert for Airfix. Even now, when I see a Spitfire on TV or in the Constable skies of an English summer, I'm struck by how like a *model* Spitfire it looks. Untouched by the actual conflict, our idea of war was built on a foundational network of simulation. The reproductions came first and their accuracy was subsequently authenticated – because the correctness of the details was confirmed – while simultaneously being revised, supplemented and enlarged but never *discredited* by documentaries such as *All Our Yesterdays* and, later, *The World at War*. In 1990 I went to see the film *Memphis Belle* because a model of the plane – a B-17 – featured in the original documentary (which I'd never seen) on which the later film was based. Throughout, I was anxious that some scenes were not quite *realistic* enough.

Unlike the planes whose usefulness came to an end the moment they were built and painted, mounted or hung, the miniature soldiers enjoyed a life of continuing and active service. Every year I staged a kind of military tattoo, arranging the massed ranks of miniature armed forces in regimented squares on a piece of hardboard on my bedroom floor. Invited to inspect the completed and pointless tableau, my parents praised me for my patience. (Asked to identify one quality that has defined my adult character I would choose 'raging impatience'.) While those displays were entirely ceremonial, the flipside, literally, was the landscape of fields and rivers I painted on the other side. Twigs and foliage (forest) and bits of broken wood (ruined buildings) added three-dimensional authenticity to this otherwise flattened terrain which became the site of homemade war games: 1:72 versions of the Second World War that were also restagings of the battles that raged outside in the Fairfield lanes. The difference was that whereas the outside games were played with friends the indoor versions were, with occasional exceptions, solo exercises in which I commanded both sides. (There were few games that I did not try to play on my own. Most, like Subbuteo, were heavily compromised; some, like Cluedo, proved impossible.)

Those 1:72 scale soldiers were tiny, under an inch in height. They were joined a little later by their 1:32 comrades who were just over 2 inches. One day, without announcement, there appeared in the Corner Shop a battered cardboard box full of plastic soldiers about 6 inches high. Compared with the neatly packaged

boxes of Airfix soldiers this box was like a mass grave in which American, British, German and Japanese had all been chucked together, about six of each nationality. The poses were broadly the same for each army: standing firing, kneeling firing, but there was some variation: Japanese waving a sword, British throwing a grenade or using a mine detector (it looked like he was doing the hoovering). I distinctly remember one of the American soldiers (a Marine, actually) running with a carbine, chinstrap flapping loose, and – at the risk of getting too Barthesian – the frog-foot-shaped base of another American figure, also running, carrying a Tommy gun.

And then came Action Man: the ultimate toy and, at twelve inches in height, the final stage in the recreation and scaling up of the Second World War. I knew about Action Man ahead of many of my contemporaries. The American superhero comics I bought from the Corner Shop – the first was *Spiderman* #46: 'The Sinister Shocker' – were full of ads for G.I. Joe, a foot-high 'doll' with moveable limbs and changeable weapons and uniforms. These ads featured squads of model GIs inching their way up a beach in simulated combat. Action Man, when he hit our own beaches, was obviously just Joe under an assumed name. He came with brown, black or blond (banana-yellow) hair and a disproportionately large dog tag round his neck. On his right cheek a scar imparted, to the blond one at least, a hint of duelling Prussian aristocracy. Although there were three shades of hair, Action came in only one skin colour, white, i.e. off-pink. Although there were no black Action Men there was, or so a later joke had it, an Italian one: he came out of the box with his hands raised, ready to surrender.

These boxes (with stencilled bullet holes in the M of 'Man') depicted men from each of the three services in appropriate action (camouflaged soldier bursting through exploding foliage), but the models inside were in a state of extreme combat unreadiness. Green, blue or grey fatigues – together with boots and matching plastic caps – identified him as soldier, sailor or pilot. To get Inaction ready for any kind of battle you had to shell out for accessories. In terms of expenditure, 29s. 11d. for the Man himself was not the end, nor even the beginning of the end – it was, simply, the end of the beginning. All of these accessories came with a number of red stars. The more expensive the item the more stars you received (Action himself came with five). When you had saved twenty-one stars you sent them off and got another Action Man free. These were an unfailing disappointment. Flesh-coloured, naked, they arrived by post with knee joints so weak they could barely stand, and too limp-wristed to hold a rifle. If the models purchased in shops were A1, these were D4, the dregs of production-line conscription. Following any war's tendency to recruit the fittest before being forced, subsequently, to lower standards, our Palitoy armies came increasingly to be made up of models initially rejected as unfit for duty.

But this growing army of seconds needed equipment. And so, just as war generates its own momentum, we kept forking out for munitions and uniforms. The more equipment you bought, the more stars you accumulated; the more stars you collected the more men you ended up with and the more accessories you needed. The French Revolution initiated the idea of the citizen-soldier; Palitoy pioneered the idea of the soldier-boy-consumer who, in the kind of inversion so loved by the Frankfurt School, became the *plaything* of the product in his hands. At the peak of his popularity there were estimated to be four Action Men for every three boys in the country. Bear in mind the amount of money we were spending on Airfix models and soldiers and you see that the whole toy economy had been put, so to speak, on a wartime footing: Buy for Victory!

And buy we did! In June one year, as a combined birthday present and a reward for behaving bravely when I had a tooth out, I was given the Snow Patrol outfit. My mum took a photo of my father and me in the sunny garden with our shirts off while Action sweated away in white snow-suit, green goggles and skis, black and white rifle slung over his back. The following Christmas, Action joined the Military Police and was issued with a brown tunic with a row of medal ribbons above the breast pocket, red cravat and arm band, white helmet, and buff-coloured truncheon. By Easter he was a jet pilot with grey flying suit, green-visored helmet and oxygen mask, fluorescent plastic life vest, and clipper board – similar to those used by market researchers – with a pencil tucked into one side.

Pocket money went on half-crown, single-star accessories like map cases (grey tubes with a map inside and MAPS stencilled on the outside), ammo boxes (green attaché cases labelled AMMO BOX), camouflage netting, or mess tins with knives, forks and spoons inside ... Palitoy were scrupulous about attention to detail and these details have been flawlessly imprinted on my memory: the plastic lace patterns on Action's boots; the khaki elastic strap of his carbine; the little buckle on the helmet strap and the plastic niche into which it was anchored; the genetic logo embossed on his back: Made in England by Palitoy under Licence from Hasbro © 1964.

Palitoy aimed to equip Action with all the paraphernalia of combat in reduced scale. Rival firms aimed to

reproduce all the paraphernalia of Palitoy at reduced price. Asia entered the price-war with a range of bootleg militaria from Hong Kong at a fraction of the Palitoy price: shoddy rifles, bright green helmets, camouflage trousers that were too big round the waist and sagged around Action's buttocks like builders' jeans.

On the home front, my dad overcame his objection – that Action Man was a way of getting boys to play with dolls, like girls – and conscientiously built a box fit for heroes: a hardboard barracks-pillbox where my four Men were stationed in celibate readiness. In an effort to cut costs and keep up with the insatiable demand for materiel, my mum contributed a lime-green combat jacket, a fluffy sleeping bag, a turtle-neck sweater (from an old sock), a corduroy jacket and beige slacks: Action Man Secret Agent.

Things escalated to a state of total consumption when, in an exact reversal of the chronology of the actual war, the British joined in with Tommy Gunn, a home-grown, slightly smaller and vaguely inferior version of Action Man. This may have been an accurate reflection of the way better diet and higher living standards made the Americans more robust specimens than the under-nourished, Blitz-weary Brits, but Tommy was doomed, like Britain itself, to economic defeat. With his slightly red face, elastic boot laces and gaiters, there was something strangely First World War-ish about him and he failed to make a significant contribution to the retail effort.

Besides, Action's range had by then spread to the uniforms of other armies: British, Russian and Australian infantrymen, and French Resistance fighter in black beret and polo neck (only the revolver and shoulder holster preventing his being mistaken for a beat poet). Best of all was the German Stormtrooper, which meant that the massive build-up of American arms was no longer ornamental. Action finally had someone to fight against.

Except his fighting effectiveness was severely hampered by a chronic inability to hold anything (I wrapped a rubber band around the handle of the knife to enable him to at least make a stab at holding it). This was remedied in 1973 – 'which was', as Philip Larkin said of the same year in the previous decade, 'rather late for me' – when Action developed gripping hands. By then he had already sprouted realistic hair. His voice broke soon after, rasping out a few random commands when you tugged a cord in his back. In the case of the sailor he even grew a beard. Action Man, in other words, hit *technological* puberty at exactly the same time that we did.

We had a coal fire – central heating had been invented, but was not installed in any house that we knew of – and sometimes, in winter, when the wind was blowing from a certain direction or if the logs were slightly damp, the living room would be acrid with smoke. It was depressing to come home from school and find my mum there, waiting for me, her eyes stinging, like the ghost of a house that had burned to the ground on this very spot thirty years earlier. Fortunately, the telly was also there, warmed up and ready for *Jackanory*, *Blue Peter* and, for a while, *Robinson Crusoe*.^{*} Each episode began with gently breaking waves accompanied by the ebb and tidal flow of orchestral music. Blond as David Hemmings in *Blow-Up*, kitted out as though his last stop before embarking on this ill-fated voyage was a Carnaby Street boutique, the eponymous Robinson was a decorative hero of our time as he jogged along on what could be mistaken for a very quiet day on a pristine beach in Malibu. Overjoyed to find footprints in the sand, the discovery, a few minutes later, that the prints are his own brings him face to absent face with the existential question of What's the point in looking good if there's no one to see you? So, abandoning the transient satisfactions of King's Road fashion, he moves on to a later phase of 1960s life and applies himself to an episodic regime of self-sufficiency, cobbling together a little home from driftwood and stitching together an outfit – less fetching, more practical – from animal skins. Every week he improved his lot with whatever came to hand, building chairs and tables with legs the wrong length, acquiring a goat for milking (I've not checked this but the idea of a desert-island goat is lodged firmly in my memory; did he even breed a herd of them?), and a companion in the shape of Man Friday who may or may not (I have no memory on this score) have been happily press-ganged into the role of willing servant of Crusoe's colonial ambitions.

The black-and-white sea in *Robinson Crusoe* had a hypnotic allure but I was deeply fascinated by what went on *beneath* its surface. So much so that learning to swim at Alstone Baths was just the first stroke towards achieving my ambition of becoming a deep-sea diver. I know this to be true because I wrote it in a school exercise book. I even added that while this was a dangerous occupation life had to have some risks. The teacher marked this Nietzschean observation with a tick and wrote 'True!' next to it. Televisual support was

limited. An American import, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, treated the ocean as if it were an aquatic version of outer space inhabited by futuristic monsters. The sea, in this rendering, was like a deep-budget, densely populated Loch Ness on a planet within easy reach of Neptune. Or a very large version of the fish tank in which someone across the road on Fairfield Avenue kept an eel, presumed to be electric but just murky-looking. Watered-down sci-fi like *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* was wasted on me; I wanted more of the underwater scenes glimpsed in the second-hand *Sea Hunt* hardback – an annual? – with a photograph of Lloyd Bridges on the front in a grey wetsuit, mask pushed up above his smiling face and sea-coloured eyes. It was in terrible condition, the spine held together by a thick band of coloured Sellotape, red in this instance, though my dad had also brought home from work rolls of beautifully patterned sticky tape: blue with yellow dots or squares. The book was an offshoot of an American TV series I never saw and although I enjoyed the comic strips featuring Lloyd killing a shark with a knife – an underwater variant of something Tarzan routinely did to man-eating lions – Bridges was fixed far less firmly in my consciousness than Buster Crabbe. Bridges was evidently a star, leading a glamorous American life, whereas part of the attraction of our homegrown Crabbe lay in the way that he was the opposite of a celebrity, disappearing without trace, surviving only in myth ... Except this is all wrong. He was as American as Bridges, born in California and living into his seventies until he died in one of the driest places on earth, Scottsdale, Arizona, where people regularly live to be 150 or 200 years old. What was I thinking? Can one's childhood memories, which are in some ways the most firmly embedded parts of one's consciousness, be so wide of the mark, so wrong? Ah, easy to check ... I was right after all: there *was* a British Buster Crabb who, it turns out, took his nickname from the American.

I was also devoted to *Stingray*, an early Gerry and Sylvia Anderson TV puppet show. Featuring a sleek blue and yellow (black and white) underwater craft, each episode started with the urgent declaration that 'Anything can happen in the next half hour.' I had my own plastic *Stingray* which proved more durable than the ill-fated *Fireball XL5*. Filled partly with water, *Stingray* could go under(bath)water, like a submarine. And my very first Action Man suit – I got it on the same Christmas Day as my first Action Man – was the Frogman: wetsuit, black plastic flippers, oxygen tanks, orange air-hose and matching mask. I loved frogmen from *G.I. Combat* comics, especially when they flippered out from a sub, caught a Jap diver attaching a limpet mine to the conning tower and ripped out his air-hose. I always thought how nice it must have been, after an underwater fight like that, to swim back into the sub, get dry and relax with the hot Ribena-style drink that we enjoyed at Alstone Baths. There was a problem, though, also related to our real-life experience. Just as we had trouble getting our nylon socks on after swimming lessons so it was almost impossible to get Action into and out of his wetsuit, even when – as instructed – you doused it in talcum powder. This was so difficult that I accidentally tore off his foot.

Several years later I also got the Deep Sea Diver outfit which saw Action, like a retired combat veteran, employed as an underwater navy: kitted out in brass helmet and breastplate, drysuit elasticated at wrists and ankles (also impossible to get off and on), weighted shoes that looked like customised DMs, and wielding a sledge hammer. Having dressed him up in this clobber there was nothing much to do except change him out of it.

This drudgery made me realise that when I'd said I wanted to be a deep-sea diver what I really wanted, more glamorously, was to be a frogman. Underwater labouring held no fascination; what attracted me was the underwater combat of knives and harpoons. All of which compounds the tragedy – and triumph – of my childhood, known as *Thunderball*.

I must have been the only kid at school who didn't go to see the James Bond film *Thunderball*. It's not that I wasn't allowed. My dad had no particular objection to Bond films; he didn't need one as they fell under a larger umbrella of tacit, albeit rarely enforced, prohibition. What was the point in going to the pictures when you could watch telly for free? If this suggests that there was, to him, no difference between film and TV, that was borne out by the way that, on holidays in Bournemouth or Brighton, when bad weather forced us indoors, to a cinema, we always went to see film versions of TV series: Morecombe and Wise in *That Riviera Touch*, *Steptoe and Son*, *On the Buses*.*

All the big action sequences of *Thunderball* take place underwater. I know this now and I knew it then for three reasons. First, everyone talked about it at school the whole time. Second, my mum bought a 375-piece jigsaw featuring Bond in his shorty orange wetsuit grappling with another diver clad in full-body black. Third, and most importantly, there were the bubblegum cards featuring stills from the film that we all collected. If the jigsaw was a form of compensation for missing out on the film, the cards represented complete redemption. More than complete. The full set comprised 72 cards but through diligent and careful swapping I ended up with 74 *different* cards: 74 different images with two numbers duplicated. I remember

this – and the confusion it generated – quite clearly. I'd testify in court, stand up to a cross-examination by fact-checkers at the *New Yorker* – can't memory be a species or *form* of fact? – but can't prove it because the cards are long gone. Where are they? What's happened to them? Where do things get to?

I find it hard to believe that I could have got rid of those *Thunderball* cards or the Brooke Bond albums. We are resigned to losing things – in streets in the city, on holiday, on trains and at airports – but we also lose stuff that never leaves the security of the house. Things just disappear, fade away into nothingness. *Not* to lose them requires a policy of active preservation. So it's not just the species featured in *Wildlife in Danger* who are threatened or have died; the album and all the pictures glued carefully inside it have become personally extinct, as it were, viewable only in the taxidermy of Cyberia, the wild zoo of the internet. A few years ago, in the Galapagos, my wife and I saw the giant tortoises 'described and illustrated by Peter Scott' on card number 43. Back when that series came out, in 1963, the 'new Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz [was] the best hope' for the survival of the species. We saw a load of these tortoises, both at the Research Station and elsewhere on the island, but by the end of our first afternoon had pretty well lost interest in seeing any more. I'm glad they're there, glad they're thriving, but I'd happily have swapped all my subsequent sightings – 'Got, got, got...' – for this one card, this one drawing: 'Need!' And the same goes for those *Thunderball* cards, 74 of them from a series of 72. Actually, now that I think of it, just because I had 74 cards does not mean there were *only* 74; someone somewhere might have an unseen 75th.

I loved *everything* about the undersea world. I even loved the bends – or at least fear of the bends took its place alongside sharks and giant octopuses as another of the dangers of the deep, all of which added to its allure – but, as with many desires, never did anything to act on this love. I was not even that keen on swimming and eventually my enthusiasm faded. Then, in the early 1990s, I got a chance to learn to scuba-dive on a journalistic assignment in Sharm El-Sheikh on the Red Sea, and the faucet of my childhood fascination was immediately turned on again before it slowed to a dribble. I had such trouble equalising my ears, bobbing up and down between six and twelve feet of the surface, that I used up my oxygen in a fraction of the time enjoyed by everyone else in the group – much to the frustration of my dive-buddy who was obliged to ascend with me before we had even properly descended. The outcome of this was threefold. I left Sharm with my PADI certificate (I had *just* scraped through), an ear infection, and a feeling, not dissimilar to a condition diagnosed at length by David Foster Wallace, that this was something I was in no hurry ever to do again.

But do it again I did, on holiday in Sicily where I joined a group who were going out on a dive-boat. I had my PADI card and hired all the equipment I needed. My girlfriend Valeria was with me but she stayed on the boat as we flipped over the side. After five minutes of bobbing around only a few metres below the surface I came back up, having once again failed to unblock my ears. As a result of all the internalised huffing and puffing, I'd succeeded in giving myself a huge nosebleed so that I broke the surface with a mask full of blood. Valeria, watching from the dive-boat, thought that my eyeballs had burst. That was my last dive. Scuba-diving was added to the list of things like playing chess, drinking spirits, fine dining or taking an interest in cars, the *not* doing of which is a source of active and ongoing satisfaction. If this ever-expanding list had a heading or title it would be 'Life'.

Which did I love more: underwater or open sky, sub-aqua or free-fall, frogmen or parachutists? Impossible to say, but parachuting engaged as much of my fascination as deep-sea diving. In the military realm I was doubly served: by paratroopers jumping out of planes on a mission, on a static line, and by aircrew hurriedly bailing out after their bomber or fighter had been hit. I liked the way that the aircrew's parachutes were slung low behind them, almost like a cushion or a form of lumber support: a precursor of sorts to the low-slung bass in rock bands. I knew the drill of bailing out. Having clambered out of your Spitfire before it burst into flames, or as the wing came off your Lancaster, you fell through the sky for several seconds before pulling the ripcord to avoid the blooming chute getting caught up in the plane – assuming that you'd not already been smashed to pieces by the tailfin.

On TV an American series called *Ripcord* wrung multiple variations from the simple template of the adventures of a skydiving operation. Whatever the premise of each week's episode – a robbery, a malfunctioning plane, some kind of airborne rescue – the point was always and solely to generate parachuting footage. Understood, accepted and profoundly satisfying though this was, new scenarios and dangers had constantly to be added to the mix – a mix that was not a mix at all. Aside from an occasionally malfunctioning rig, these always took the same form and involved an arithmetic so simple that even the youngest viewer could fully grasp the awful gravity of its results. Whatever the aircraft (a Cessna, more

often than not), irrespective of the danger, story, or altitude, and however many characters were involved in a given situation, there had always to be more people than there were parachutes, or, to put it the other way round, at least one parachute too few. So some poor schmuck had to jump out of the aircraft – doomed or otherwise compromised – without a chute in the hope of linking up mid-air with one of the other jumpers who, while fortunate enough to be the sole beneficiary of a functioning parachute, would be either happy or feel otherwise compelled, however implausible the explanation, to share it with someone in terminal (velocity) need.

In the non-TV world, normal para-activity culminated in an annual event we never went to – and never missed. The military tattoo, held at Whaddon football ground, home of our local team, the Robins, climaxed with a display of free-fall parachuting. You didn't need to spend money on getting into the ground in order to see the smoke trails of the parachutists in free-fall, and when their canopies deployed it was easy to see them, still gracefully trailing smoke as they swayed to earth. Keith Williams, who did go to the stadium, said that one member of the team, described by the announcer as a 'show-off', cut away his main chute – though that was a term we only learned later – and used his emergency chute to provide added excitement. Could this be true? Wouldn't it have been outlawed by the various health and safety rules put in place to minimise the chance of accidents, to prevent him crashing into the crowd or through the roof of a nearby house in the event of a malfunction in the reserve chute? Either way, I was determined when I grew up to be either a diver or a parachutist.

The same magazine that had sent me to learn to scuba-dive subsequently dispatched me to Norfolk to learn to sky-dive. (Depending on one's point of view I had become either a kind of John Noakes of literary journalism or a master of getting big and expensive experiences for free.) After a couple of days of intensive training and, as we approached the drop zone, amid gathering clouds of self-doubt, I made clear to the disappointed instructors that I had no desire to jump out of the plane and no intention of doing so.

The military tattoo was not the only thing we didn't go to at the Whaddon football ground. I had a normal kid's interest in fireworks: I liked buying them from Jackson's and the Corner Shop – they looked beautiful even before they burst into life – and I liked the little displays in our or Yo and Daryl's garden, but what I came to like most was letting off bangers ahead of Guy Fawkes Day with my friends in Naunton Park rec: throwing them like grenades after the blue touch-paper had been lit, rolling them under the door of the locked public bogs up by the swings. That was fun, the kind of fun featured, a few years later, in BBC documentaries about horrible facial injuries caused by fireworks. After that, urged on by my mum, I didn't go out at all on Bonfire Night. She had a similarly cautious attitude to the dodgems when the fair came to town, either at Montpellier Gardens or Sandford Park. The daughter of one of her friends had had her teeth knocked out on them, so fairgrounds also came under the heading of excessive danger. A photo of my mum and dad, smartly dressed and having a fun old time on the dodgems, contradicts or at least predates this prohibition and I had a contradictory reaction to it myself. I wanted to go – everyone wanted to go – to the fair even though I never liked the pukey waltzers or the revolting toffee apples and pink clouds of candyfloss. The din and lurch of lights and noise had the quality of nightmare rather than treat – a nightmare that continued in broad daylight when the poor goldfish, brought home in a water-swollen plastic bag, was found floating, blotchy and dead, within a week of being rehoused in the more luxurious solitude of the bowl on our sideboard, next to the telly.



Even at the risk of this book suddenly reading like the autobiography of someone who went on to become a minor British painter best known for seascapes, I want it on record that my first attempts at creating art involved the underwater world. This came in the form of Panorama transfers: empty backdrops of various places and different periods of history on which figures could be imprinted from a transparent sheet by scribbling with a pen. The background was folded into three and opened up to form an empty scene with the aspect ratio of a cinema screen. I had three of these. The first, naturally, was the underwater one (fish and frogmen); then came the American West (a fort, US cavalry, cowboys and Indians) and, a little later, a medieval castle (defenders, attackers, siege engines). Within this blank canvas and the supplied cast of characters and props you could create your own scenes. Some of the figures were incomplete, cut off at the waist to indicate that they were to be placed behind the walls of the castle or the pointed timbers of the fort, but they were all the same size, all suspended vertically in a pre-perspectival zone where horses and Indians in the foreground were no larger than the truncated men scanning the threatening landscape from the castle or the fort. Essentially medieval, this worked well with the castle and siege engines, and with the underwater world where everything floated alongside everything else with none of the visual layering of distance and sequence. Although we lived in a post-Renaissance world, perspective had not imprinted itself on our consciousness. Despite its breadth, Panorama was a vertical format in which nothing unfolded over or across time; it was, instead, a kid's dream-time. The manufacturers missed a trick by not coming up with a scenario featuring the ancient Egyptians. We could have entered happily into that flattened realm of representation in which nothing was ever going to happen because everything happened at once.

After rubbing over the transfer with a biro, the image instantly appeared on the empty background which soon became the opposite of empty, impossibly crowded with figures who could never be arranged into a story, all making exactly equal claims to prominence. By the end it was a matter of looking for a bit of vacant space in the sea – a kind of negative version of over-fishing – or in what had once been the invitingly open expanse of the American plains, before the choking influx of transfers. In this way Fort Laramie – or whichever frontier outpost it was supposed to be – enacted the real history of the American West whereby the spacious plains the Indians had roamed for ages, chasing neighbouring tribes off lands they claimed as their own, became insufficient to sustain the ambitions and rapacious needs of white settlers. Although the fort was part of the printed – and therefore unchangeable – background, the wigwams came as transfers: they could, in other words, go anywhere, consistent with the nomadic lives of the Indians as opposed to the solid, unchanging permanence of the paleface's forts. Once complete the Panorama resembled nothing else so much as a dense version of those Native American pictographs telling the story of slaughter and, ultimately, a choice that was not a choice between the forced removal to reservations (deeded to them in a perpetuity which soon got shrunk to a couple of years) and genocide.

After sea and sky the next beckoning retail frontier was space. Wall's, the ice-cream makers, issued a series of 'Moon Fleet' cards which may have been unique to Sky Ray, the tricolour (red, yellow and green) rocket-shaped lolly remembered fondly by Fiona Pitt-Kethley as a 'Martian's willy'. At the end of the poem she is left, as we all were, with a stick – a slightly sticky stick – so maybe there was some enacted parable built into the sweet engineering of the lolly, an introduction to the idea of going up like a rocket and down like a stick.

The Sky Ray was both the latest incursion of space into the realm of confectionary – Milky Way, 'the sweet you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite', had long been a corner-shop staple – and another sign of how thoroughly the fantasy and reality of space travel had begun to permeate our childhood. Much of this permeating was done by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson. In addition to *Fireball XL5*, *Thunderbirds*, and later *Captain Scarlet* on TV (and still later the real-life – i.e. non-puppet – series *UFO*), the enterprising Andersons were also responsible for launching the most exciting British comic of my childhood. Until then there were basically two kinds of British comic: on the one hand, the *Beano*, the *Dandy* and the *Beezer*; on the other, action titles like *Valiant* (war) and *Eagle* (sci-fi). These weekly increments of pleasure prepared the way for – and climaxed with – each title's annual. So let's pause for a moment to recall the solid bliss of the annual as a Christmas present. Like a big Airfix bomber, but unlike a soft and floppy sweater or scarf, an annual announced itself with the certainty of hard-edged happiness. The cover of the *Valiant* annual from 1965 featured two commandos in a canoe – one paddling, the other blasting away with his Tommy gun – while behind them, in the harbour, enemy ships exploded in the fire-streaked night. That was the most perfect single image of the entire Second World War, in tangible and angular form. *Eagle's* star character was Dan Dare but this 'pilot of the future' was so rooted in the past that space seemed like an astral projection of a costume drama set on the bridge of a reupholstered destroyer during the Battle of the Atlantic.

And then, suddenly, a new future announced itself in the form, appropriately, of something more like a newspaper than a comic. The news stories in *TV Century 21* featured all the expected Anderson crews and craft, but the essential development was that the future had arrived at our doorstep: delivered, like milk, but converting that door into the airlock of a space station. A related combination of the sci-fi future and the familiar present was established by the declaration that 'Every Wall's shop where you see the Wall's sign is now a Moon Fleet Base.' The introduction to Wall's picture album – or 'The Moon Fleet Log Book' to be precise – blithely assumes that people will live and work on the moon, and 'eventually explore more distant planets like Mars and Venus'.

All of this was both a long and short way from the reality of the Wall's factory near Gloucester where a friend of my dad's worked. He could get us occasional ice creams and lollies at a vastly discounted price – though the corollary of this was an intensification of my dad's outrage at the price-hike experienced on holiday in London when purchasing a choc-ice near Madame Tussauds. While it was never clear how his friend obtained these cut-price ice creams my dad insisted they were a 'perk'. He loved that rarely used word – didn't say it so much as lick it – partly because this was almost the only perk that came his way.

In class one day Mr Grinnell offered everyone the chance to have their pencils sharpened with the special sharpener attached to his desk. We all lined up – everyone wanted their pencils sharpened – and handed our pencils to him. For no reason, some kids had their pencils sharpened while the rest of us were refused and told to go to the back of the queue. There was no logic. It was mystifying, inexplicable, in the same way that people would later be turned away arbitrarily by the bouncers at Berghain. The only difference here was that you got another chance, and second time around some people succeeded in having their pencils sharpened. Others, like me, were turned away repeatedly. I had liked Mr Grinnell ever since our first class with him, when ginger-haired Theresa Ahearne plonked herself down at the desk right next to mine. It was an unbelievable humiliation, to sit next to a girl, and as soon as Mr Grinnell saw what had happened he moved her to the proper side of class, with the other girls. But now I was being penalised, for no reason. By the next round of sharpening there were only a handful of repeat offenders left and still no one understood what it was we were guilty of. Initially those who'd had their pencils sharpened felt special. Gradually the balance shifted and the few who were still being turned away felt more and more abject, victimised. Eventually everyone had their pencils sharpened – I got through on the fourth round – and the mysterious vetting process was revealed. People who handed their pencils to Mr Grinnell point first were turned away; only those who presented the other end of their pencil got them sharpened. What had started

as a matter of luck had become a test of behaviour. And the same behaviour, the same principle, he explained, was even more important if you ever handed someone a knife. This was probably the most successful lesson of my life: the one learned earliest and remembered longest.

On Fairfield Avenue, on the other side of the much-creosoted fence of our terraced fort, sat my dad's proudest possession: his sky-blue Vauxhall Victor. Bought new in 1963, it had bench seats (if it had seatbelts they were never used) and wipers that faced inwards from opposite sides of the windscreen, clearing two large distinctive portholes of visibility, separated by a slender stem and curving canopy of untouched grime. The steering wheel was hard and thin. Later, for his birthday one year, we bought my dad a red leopard-spotted steering-wheel cover.

We can call in some supporting documentary evidence about this marvellous vehicle, from David Kynaston's *Modernity Britain* in which he quotes the 18 July 1957 issue of *Vauxhall Mirror*, the cheery house magazine of Vauxhall Motors in Luton: 'One more Victor rolls off the track and then the family is off on holiday ... It's good to be beside the seaside and it's good to know that the Victor – like all our products – is going swimmingly.' Especially if the car is sky blue, like ours: the colour of holidays. So we were part of something, part of a rising tide of living standards when we made our regular Friday drives out to Shurdington to visit my dad's sisters. These visits comprised three segments: Uncle Harry and Lean, Auntie Joan, and Uncle Eric and Auntie Dink, always in that order.

Unlike the dinner or drinks party, the visit is distinguished by the lack of occasion – you are not coming for anything, are there solely for the visit – and the lack of anything being laid on specifically for the occasion (logically enough, since it isn't an occasion, let alone a 'special occasion'). This does not mean that nothing is available, offered or consumed; you get and become part of whatever happens to be going at that time, which is basically tea. And there's no real narrative to a visit the way there is for a dinner. On these Friday night visits the absence of narrative was filled by one of the first feelings I'd had which, while not more complex than hunger or thirst, was certainly more evolved: the desire to leave. This was complicated by the way that leaving meant going on to the next visit or, to use an expression not then available, kicking the can down the road. There were two reasons for wanting to leave, wanting the visit to be over, both whippet-related.

First in the Friday prial, summer-time visits to Uncle Harry and Lean's big council house on Leckhampton Lane began outside, in the large back garden. As with all of the neighbouring houses the whole of this garden had been given over to cultivation so that, from the air, the impression would have been of a ribbon of allotments. From a patch of lawn no bigger than a legless snooker table the garden stretched back in careful rows of potatoes, runner beans, spring onions, blackcurrant bushes. At the bottom of the garden was a new addition: a greenhouse in which the warm air was thick with the smell of firm, mainly green tomatoes.

After admiring Harry's greenhouse we went into the actual house where five whippets quivered around the kitchen. I was allergic to whippets (their hair) and had a deep aversion – stronger, in a way, than an allergy – to the smell of their food. My eyes ran and itched, not just in the kitchen but in the living room where we watched *Take Your Pick* with Michael Miles: a good example of something not being laid on, just something that would have been there – been on – anyway. Harry smoked constantly. The smell of cigarettes mingled with the smell of cooking which mingled with the smell of dog food. Childhood is full of bad smells but we accept them as a necessary part of the world we've been born into. There are the alimentary or lavatorial smells that everyone wants to avoid (the bogs at school, made more horrible by the sheets of shiny, non-absorbent toilet paper, more like hard tracing paper than toilet paper) but there's a subset of smells that are horrible because they're associated with the opposite end of the digestive process (eating) and are supposed to be nice (food). Apart from strawberries and tomatoes a high percentage of my childhood food smelled horrible – I don't think I ever came into a kitchen and thought 'Hmm, that smells good!' – but in Harry's house there was the complicating factor that came from the intermingling of human and dog food.

Sometimes we left Harry's house quickly, usually we stayed till the end of *Take Your Pick* to see who got the booby prize. That was the real climax of the show: not American-style rejoicing as the winner went home with the spoils but English satisfaction at seeing that there was someone worse off than you, even on telly, the sense that life itself might be a sort of booby prize or, this was the way I was leaning, an allergy: inflamed eyes, a constant desire to sneeze that would continue, albeit in a reduced way, even after we left and walked a few houses down the road, to Auntie Joan in the big house where my dad's family had grown

up. (Not big enough, though, to accommodate my dad and his brother Jim, who had been farmed out, as it were, taken in as lodger by another local family.) Auntie Joan's house was more interesting than Uncle Harry's because it was so spooky, the kind of place Shirley Jackson might have written about if she'd been born in a council house in Gloucestershire. Auntie Joan lived there with occasional lodgers and a large poodle called Sasha, who barked – more ferociously than his appearance merited – as we scraped open the wonky gate to her garden path. It was like entering a realist fairy tale which dispensed with the usual alluring trimmings, the bits before everything turns sinister – unless, that is, Sasha was the attractive part. Joan clipped his hair into elaborate pompoms but his black eyes conveyed a sense that he was trapped within the snow-white of this absurd costume, like a man convinced he had been confined, at birth, in a woman's body. Joan appeared soon after Sasha, standing on her doorstep, arms folded, welcoming us in the style of a frontier woman determined to stand her ground and defend her council homestead against all-comers, even relatives she was pleased to see. The concrete path was cracked. Moss and grass grew in these cracks, harmless portents of a future in which all signs of a once-functioning welfare state could slowly be erased.

Auntie Joan's house smelled like Harry's for the same reason: the kitchen where she prepared food for herself and for Sasha. By association we and the dogs ate the same food. While my parents talked with Joan, I went upstairs, as I always did when we visited. The wallpaper on the landing was brown or gloomy yellow with age. Along one wall was a large glass cabinet full of stuffed birds: rooks, sparrows and thrushes. In the dim light they looked dead and, at the same time, because of the poses in which they'd been arranged, full of life: forever on the point of swooping down or taking off. Near one of the bedroom doors, in another glass container, was a large black crow, wings spread as if in full flight. It was scary, obviously, but not in the shrieking way of a ghost train. This was subtler and had to do, I think, with the feeling of trapped or stale time – an impression heightened by the exhausted wallpaper and the smell of cooked food downstairs: dead animals to be eaten either by dogs or by humans. Perhaps also it was the combination of birds, with their home in the endless outdoors of the sky, being triply confined, by taxidermist, cabinets and walls. There were no ghosts; the house was so dismal in its own right it didn't need to be haunted. Looking back I wonder if those birds might have been heirlooms – stuffed trophies commemorating the life and work of my great-grandfather whose occupation had been a bird-catcher.

I stepped down the stairs and out through the kitchen door into the long garden, walking along a narrow concrete path littered with chewed bones and half-eaten rubber balls. The layout was similar to Harry's: wide-leaved rhubarb, light brown soil, orderly rows of vegetables and, at the bottom of the garden, the same field with pylons rising hugely and stretching off into the distance. Cows munched at the grass.

A hand touched my shoulder. It was Ken, one of Joan's lodgers. He was, as my dad said, simple. He had large ears and eyes that looked like they could not see properly or quickly.

'Hello, Ken,' I said. It was OK to call him Ken even though he was grown up. When he grinned I could see he had a tooth missing.

'All right?' he said.

'Yes, thank you.'

'Cows, eh?'

'Yes.'

'There was a goat in this field yesterday.'

'Was there?'

'Tied to that post there. They can butt you, goats. You've got to watch 'em. They can really butt you.'

'Yes.'

'Don't know whose it was.'

'Don't you?' I said.

'Could be anybody's, I s'pose.' Ken's shirt was untucked. He hoisted up his trousers and tucked his shirt into his underpants. I tried to think of something to say, to make him say more things about goats and cows.

'Do you like cows, Ken?' I said, gazing at his half-closed eyes and missing tooth.

'Oh yes.'

'What do you like about them?'

'What do I like about 'em? Well, that's a funny question. I don't know. I likes 'em well enough, though,' he said, still grinning but looking a little uncomfortable, as though he might be caught out. 'Well, I'd better be getting inside. Soon be time for bed.'

'Do you always go to bed this early?' I said.

‘About now.’

‘I go to bed later than this. Much later.’

‘Ah well,’ he said.

I watched him tramp back up the path towards the house, which served as a kind of low-intensity loony bin, a halfway house from Coney Hill, where the stuffed birds kept anyone from ever feeling normal. On my own again I turned my attention back to the field. It was nice, because it was a field, because there were cows in it, eating grass in the evening light, but I never felt, while looking out from Joan’s garden, that this amounted to a nice *view*. There was a used-up feel about it, as if it were diminished by the row of houses in which I was standing. And then there were the pylons which retrospectively insisted that the prospect had never been regarded as idyllic – if it had been they would not have been built there. So the whole scene, from every point of view, was ... not blighted exactly but intruded-upon, utilitarian, and reduced. I did not acquire a taste for beauty; I had some kind of longing for it even then but this manifested itself only as a feeling of compromise or absence, of something not there, an unfounded hope for more.

Back inside, in the kitchen, Auntie Joan was telling my parents how Ken had wet his bed a week ago. He had done it on the Tuesday and had not told Joan; he had not even changed the sheets. Auntie Joan had only discovered what had happened when she went into his room one day when he was out at the spaz centre. She called him ‘a dirty B’ when he came home and when she said that he began to cry. She felt sorry for him. He was a lot of work but he was a good boy.

‘Do you want some chocolate buttons?’ Auntie Joan asked me. She tugged open the sideboard drawer – always slightly stuck – and produced a crumpled brown paper bag. She fed some drops to Sasha and gave the rest to me: proof of the associative hunch that in this house humans and dogs shared the same food. They didn’t taste like Cadbury’s chocolate buttons. Darker and harder, obviously inferior, probably cheaper, they might even have been made especially for dogs.

It was growing dark while I chewed my chocolate dog buttons so Auntie Joan put the light on. Dead flies showed up blackly in the opaque glass bowl that hung under the light.

After Joan’s we drove to Bishop Road, to Auntie Dink and Uncle Eric’s, near the shop where Dink worked. It was always nice at Uncle Eric and Auntie Dink’s which, alongside the Alstone Baths and, later, the lido, became the focus of my aquatic life. They had a pair of blue flippers, and a yellow mask and snorkel with a ping-pong ball in a little plastic cage at the top of the breathing tube. These accessories were site-specific. I never took them to the swimming pool, just flapped around in them, mainly in their garden but also, on a few occasions, in their upstairs bathroom, the walls of which had been painted with fish, mermaids, swaying seaweed, patterned ripples, suggested waves. No one else had a bathroom – or a room of any kind – remotely like this. Painted by a friend of Auntie Dink’s, it was so unusual that my parents almost disapproved, not because they *did*, just because they didn’t know how else to react. That mural was the nearest I got, in the face-clenching mask and awkward flippers – especially unsuitable for climbing stairs – to water.

Whereas Harry’s and Joan’s houses were contaminated by dog food, Auntie Dink cooked one of the few things I liked: minced meat. And not only was there nothing horrible about their house, there was a general sense of light and happiness, though it turned out that Uncle Eric nursed more inner darkness and unhappiness than anyone.

Eric had a broad Gloucestershire accent. My dad’s accent was softer while my mum’s was the Shropshire–Gloucestershire equivalent of mid-Atlantic. My dad often tended to substitute ‘him’ for ‘it’ so that if he was telling me to fill up a can with water he’d say ‘Fill him up.’ Some words were habitually mispronounced. If I was told to empty a container I’d be told to ‘Emp’ him out.’ Reservoir was ‘reservoy’. My wife and I have adopted and preserved most of these usages. That’s how we speak to each other all the time now. After a flight back to Los Angeles from Johannesburg via London she found, on waking, that her left eye stayed shut. Or, as she put it, ‘He just wouldn’t open.’ We love keeping my mum and dad alive like this.

At junior school quite a few parents, including mine, paid for their kids to have some elocution lessons. And even though my mum and dad both fell short of ‘correct’ grammar and received pronunciation, they disapproved, absolutely, of the way Uncle Harry spoke, especially his habit of replacing the direct pronoun ‘She’ with the indirect ‘Her’ – or, more accurately, ‘Er’ (‘Er’s gone to the shops’ or ‘Er’s in the garden’). No one else spoke like this: not Lean, Eric or anyone in the family. Just Harry. This was deep Gloucestershire backwoods talk. I suspect that by then, the mid-60s, it was seldom heard: an endangered dialect that was a residue of earlier times, when the language had not developed its later capacity for more intricate

formulation. Not that Harry worked on the land; he was an electrician by trade but had been forced to stop work because of a problem with his eyes, which loomed behind goggle-thick glasses. Although officially retired he still did some small electrical jobs for the family and my mum in particular regarded his skill with the kind of awe associated with a shaman who has access to the realm of the supernatural. 'It's so silent, electricity,' she said whenever Harry ventured into the unknown currents of our cupboard beneath the stairs. He smoked unfiltered cigarettes all the time and at the end of every visit, whether purely social or to sort out an electrical issue, always pressed a sixpence into my palm with the instruction to 'Buy yourself a big un.' This was borderline misuse. My dad didn't say 'one'. If I had to render how he said 'one' it would have to be printed as 'un' – as when we were watching Woody Allen play squash in *Manhattan* on the telly and he observed, accurately, 'The little un's not up to much, is he?' – but Harry's 'un' was much further from 'one' than my dad's, far more *un*-like, as it were.

Like all the men on my dad's side of the family, not just those to whom he was related by blood but also those who had married the Dyer women (was this a requirement, the equivalent, in Jane Austen novels, of a large fortune?), Harry was very tall and extremely thin. This is something worthy of medical research. How was it that generations of rural labour had left these sons of the Gloucestershire peasantry – among whose number I count myself psychologically and physically – with the frames of House of Usher aristocrats? Harry may have been the thinnest of all, or at least he looked it: belted up in a mackintosh and never removing the cycle clips he wore to protect his sagging trousers from the oil on his moped. In this way, too, he plunged us into the past, looking like one of those belted, weather-protected figures you see in photographs from the earliest days of motoring.

For my birthday one year Uncle Harry gave me a surprisingly large present. The battered old box – faded, sagging in the middle, crumpled at the corners – showed boys with grinning Brylcreemed hair and a girl with delighted pigtails playing table tennis. Inside there was no internal packaging, no white cardboard with shaped recesses in which were displayed and anchored the various components of the experience so enthusiastically illustrated. Lying loose, these comprised a green net (posts not included), a single ball (dirt-smudged, star-less) and two paddles, obviously homemade. The 'rubber' on one side of these bats was neither dimpled nor sandwich, and nor was it made of rubber. On these austere and coarse implements sandpaper was the medium intended to impart spin. That was the *good* side of the bat, the side featuring what was, relatively speaking, cutting-edge technology; the other side was bare wood. Assigning a date to these implements was no simple matter. Although they lagged behind paddle technology by three decades, possibly more, they were also brand-new, had clearly been knocked together by Harry in his shed, a few afternoons earlier, making the box seem of even more ancient provenance. This raised a more interesting question: how did he expect to pass this off as a present worthy of being given? I say 'present' but this was all about the past: a time machine disguised as a gift. Not that the box looked like it had been *suddenly* transported from the 1930s. No, it had come from the pre-war period in real time, as it were: an authentic relic from an era of profound scarcity, considerable resourcefulness, and enduring, even lavish stinginess. In its way the batteredness of the box – not second- or even third-hand, but fifth- or sixth- at the very least – was the perfect introduction to what was inside. To that extent Harry had solved the great riddle of no-budget present-giving: how to avoid disappointment on the part of the recipient. He had achieved this so definitively that when I opened the box I was, if anything, mildly elated or, if I can phrase it like this, entirely undisappointed. The packaging invited one to expect nothing and what one got was very slightly more than nothing or, as the expression has it, better than nothing (if quantity is itself a value). Everything was of a piece. Harry stood there looming, the box and its contents the perfect and tangible representation of a system of battered grammar which rendered Auntie Lean as 'Er'.

By one of life's ironies, Harry, in the mid-1980s, became one of the richest people in the family – by marriage. As my dad put it on the phone, speaking quietly in case the world overheard, 'Your Auntie Lean has become a very rich woman.' She'd won a quarter or perhaps even half a million quid on the Football Pools. This sent shockwaves through the entire family, shockwaves which took the form of variations of a single question: Who was going to get what? Naturally, Harry and Lean were going to buy both the council house where they lived – this was at the height of Thatcherism – and the ancestral home of the Dyers, where Lean had grown up and where Joan still lived. Equally obviously Lynette (their only daughter) and her husband Terry were going to move to a new house and some would be put aside – a trust fund! – for their two kids, but there would still be a lot left over. Almost immediately, though, my dad had an inkling

that from his perch – precariously balanced between covetousness and resignation – ‘a lot’ might translate into its opposite, ‘a little’, that he was going to feel hard done by. Rumours began to circulate of a microwave oven and a toaster, the kind of smaller items that the winning contestant remembered from the conveyor belt in the final round of Bruce Forsyth’s *Generation Game* (‘Didn’t he do well!’) but which, in this context, were the equivalent of the booby prizes we’d watched Michael Miles hand out in *Take Your Pick*. (Didn’t he do badly!) It had always been axiomatic in our family that money can’t buy you happiness but it could, it seems, buy you unhappiness in the form of something you already had (a toaster), didn’t even want (the microwave) and, in either case, might not get. The ‘big un’ routinely offered by Uncle Harry when I was a kid was shrinking, starting to look like it might be a horribly small un. The immediate effects of this were tightly confined and, as the ripples expanded, slightly adverse, though this adversity acquired a familiar pattern. My dad felt hard done by, which, since this is how he always felt – or, more accurately, how he always felt he was going to feel – meant nothing changed, just as nothing would have changed if he’d been presented with his rightful slice of the cake and share of the spoils. There never was a big hand-out, but one person did turn this restricted windfall into what at the time was called a nice little earner: me, by publishing an article about it in the *New Statesman*.

Those visits to the Shurdington relatives were not our only outings in the versatile Victor. In the summer we also went occasionally, with Yo, Daryl and Tina, to the Mill in Withington for chicken-in-the-basket. Although we may have sat in the umbrella-and-bench garden, I can picture us sitting in the car, two rows of chewers, so that the pub car park became a kind of drive-in. Was this because my mum never felt comfortable in a pub, not even in a pub garden, or is it a false memory conjured up precisely by this aversion of hers? I can’t think what she drank. No alcohol, obviously, but she didn’t like *any* cold drinks – unlike my dad who, in addition to the occasional pale ale, also loved squash, orange or lemon, loved it to his dying day – so it’s quite possible that she drank nothing, only ever ate, and I do know what she ate: chicken-in-the-basket like the rest of us. So let’s remember it like that, six of us in the Vauxhall Victor with its two bench seats, eating chicken-in-the-basket, enjoying the freedom to dispense with cutlery and eat chicken-in-the-basket with our fingers. These were happy times in the late, slow light of the Cotswolds. The drive from Cheltenham on the A40, through Charlton Kings and out past the reservoir, was an adventure and extravagance in itself, and the journey back, in the changed, tree-y twilight, felt less like the conclusion than an extension of that adventure. As the day faded it seemed possible that a hand could emerge from the still dark water of the Arthurian reservoir, clutching Excalibur.

The legend of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was fully present throughout my childhood, all the more so, perhaps, for not having been committed to film by Disney or anyone else. I had an illustrated book, like an annual, with a hard cover – framed by a yellow background, the young Arthur was pulling a sword from an anvil – but that helped build a realm of possibility rather than seal it off behind a wall of representation. Perhaps that’s why a film like John Boorman’s *Excalibur* felt like a let-down as the full force of this richly visual myth depends in part on its resistance to depiction on film. There are two ways of viewing this. As films, TVs and screens have defined our culture, so the legend of Arthur has faded, is no longer part of the deep reservoir of an English child’s unconscious, is just one element in a CGI composite of the adaptable past. Or maybe that’s wrong because these legends and myths embody something irreducible, capable of surviving over spans of time that make changes of taste, fashion and representation seem transitory. Beneath the blank and black surface of the water – itself invisible in the starry darkness of night – Excalibur is still there, unseeable, its wonder undimmed.

That quote from Kynaston is not the only bit of supporting evidence for our Victor. There are also two photos. The first is a black-and-white snap of me in cowboy outfit, standing in front of the car as if outside the swinging doors of a saloon in a western.

The other, of a day trip, is in colour – colours that leap out: red, blue and green, the first blazingly distinct, the other two bleeding into each other. The grass is green, naturally, but the trees in the background and the sky look as if they might one day merge. Partly this is the result of what presently separates them: the band of hills that were literally vegetative green but here appear as a darker blue than the sky. Why? Because they’re not just any old hills; these are the ‘blue remembered hills’ from A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

But they're not *just* Housman's hills; their provenance is more complicated than that. They comprise a geomorphological backdrop to a cultural landmark of more recent formation: Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979) about a bunch of kids – all played by adults – in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. So: Shropshire, where my mum was born, Gloucestershire, where my dad and I were born.

I'm guessing the photograph was taken in Gloucestershire, in about 1964, when I was six (so my mum and dad would have been thirty-nine and forty-five respectively). On Sundays we often drove out to various nearby beauty spots or places like Bourton-on-the-Water: a Cotswold village so picturesque it could have been manufactured in Las Vegas.*

Those Sunday afternoon drives in the Vauxhall Victor to the villages of the Cotswolds were always a pleasure even if a kind of insisted-on anagram from my dad meant that the price of petrol had to be factored in so that the Cotswolds became the Costwold: a mountainous range of escalating expense extending from our doorstep to a world whose fringes were conceived – though rarely visited – almost exclusively in terms of vertiginously steep prices, as symbolised by that traumatically costly choc-ice bought near Madame Tussauds.

When I say, truthfully, that I have no memory of the picture being taken I'm conscious that this is meaningless because, of course, the photograph *is* memory. If I remember the weather of my childhood as perpetually sunny that is because photographs – like the one of me and Keith in the brick-patterned paddling pool in the front garden of Fairfield Walk – were only taken on days when the light was deemed sufficient, as though we were stuck in a nineteenth-century gloom of unnaturally extended exposure times. This picture, which seems like a pure emanation of memory, includes the person whose memories it represents: the person, that is, whose consciousness never included this view of himself. I have no idea who took the picture. As a result, and because it includes all three of us – it's not like there was an older brother or sister who, by taking the picture, rendered it incomplete due to their absence – something strange happens. The literal explanation must be that an unknown friend, relative or passer-by took the picture but, in the absence of clinching evidence to the contrary, it's not unreasonable to think that the place itself made a record of the day we turned up there. Remember: Housman's blue remembered hills have their memories too.

Moving from background to foreground, from the natural world to the mechanical, the sky-blue Victor is shown here to great effect, looking like an American car but less elongated, as though a US model had been shortened in order to better accommodate itself in our narrow island. We've clearly just parked the car, in a car park with few cars as was the norm back in the days before *traffic*. The relative brevity of the number plate – 3489 AD, the first number I ever memorised – attests to that. 'AD' identifies it as a vehicle bought in Gloucestershire but it was a source of pleasure to my dad because they were his initials – Arthur Dyer – even though everyone called him Jack or John. I prefer to think of the number plate as offering a kind of internal dating, AD 3489, as if this image from the past were a sci-fi projection – obsolete and erroneous as these things often turn out to be – of what the future might one day look like.

The bus in the background hints at a less distant future in the form of the raves and festivals – Tribal Gathering, Pendragon – I went to in the 1990s, though there is no indication as to what kind of gathering this might have been. Again, the absence of evidence suggests that back in this uncongested golden age of British motoring, the car park *was* the festival.

It may seem equally bizarre that my dad's sweater is tucked into his trousers but since he tucked his shirt into his underpants an internally layered logic is at work. Both that red sweater (never as red as it looks here, more rust-coloured) and my blue one would have been knitted by my mum. I grew out of mine but eventually grew into his, wearing it – untucked – well into my twenties. (By the 1980s, the technology of film had changed so that the red dulled into literal truth, never again achieving the fictive bloom recorded

here.) My parents were, as my mum used to say, good with their hands, though his left hand looks rather odd, like a three-fingered, flesh-coloured glove. My mum is covering up her right wrist with her left hand. She always did this. That gesture defined her for reasons that will become clear later.

For now consider the grumpy little fella in the cowboy hat. You can tell he's an only child by the way he's so attached to his inflatable companion – so adorable as to render any doubts about its species irrelevant. On another of our Sunday excursions into the Cotswolds I sang, over and over, a song about a cowboy and his horse called Old Faithful, how they roamed the range together in all kinds of weather, and how they looked forward to sharing their retirement years together, when they were put out to pasture, after their round-up days were over.

A Gene Autry song, it turns out, and further evidence of how deeply cowboyism had penetrated life in the English west, covering those blue remembered hills clover-white with another layer of culture. Maybe that blow-up companion *was* my Old Faithful. But how precociously bored he looks – me, I mean, not the companion who always looked like he was having the time of his life – possibly because back then an afternoon was so vast it constituted a significant portion of one's life.

'The past is a foreign country...' That famous opening claim of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* seems, on the evidence of this picture, like the stuff of fiction. If there is one thing the past is *not* it's another country. The past is this country, this England. England, my England. That line is like a watermark printed invisibly on every page of this book, invisibly in the sense of visibly. England, my England: that has felt more mine than ever since I've been living where I've long dreamed of being, in California, where I'll never feel at home.

I insist on this even though the little boy will not turn into a Little Englander. *Pas de tout!* In his twenties he'll fall under the modish sway of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* with its seductive idea of the *punctum*: the unintended detail that Barthes finds in photographs that affect him most deeply. Look how my dad is speared through the midriff by the speedy decal of the car behind him. And how my mum has a pole through her head, exactly as happens to the young girl kneeling over the body of a dead student in John Paul Filo's photograph of the massacre at Kent State in 1970. (How often this occurs in photographs! Perhaps it takes considerable photographic skill to stop people getting accidentally impaled like this.) Barthes' *punctum* – he writes of how it 'pricks' him – crops up here so literally as to translate the suave Gallic formulation into a kind of visual slapstick.

And not only that. For Barthes a single picture of his recently deceased mother, the so-called 'winter garden photograph', captured what he considered her defining characteristic *and* the essence of photography. This Anglo summer-field snap is not the equivalent of Barthes' French bourgeois winter-garden photograph. But it has all the qualities of a certain kind of photograph – the found photograph – in the way that it contains mysteries to which it simultaneously offers answers. These greatly exceed both the intentions of the unknown photographer and the technical limitations of the camera.

One other thing too. This picture persuades me that Barthes was as misleading as Hartley when he remarked on 'that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead'. There's nothing terrible about it, and the dead, in photographs, do the only thing they can do: they stay dead. The little cowboy doesn't know that yet – how could he when he's not seen this picture? – but he will. Maybe he seems sad because to gaze into the camera is to look into the future. He knows – often, these days, finds himself thinking: I could be dead soon.

I've just unearthed another picture, blurry, black and white: me in my Junior Training Corps uniform. Our love of playing at war fed into a larger fascination with all things military. Priding ourselves on our knowledge of weaponry we also knew the hierarchy of ranks, from private to field marshal. So it was natural that we wanted to become soldiers. At the age of eight this meant joining the JTC, a subset of the Church Lads' Brigade. It was either that or the Scouts. For some reason my dad didn't like the idea of the Scouts; he probably didn't like the idea of the JTC either but, for equally unclear reasons, that was deemed preferable. This meant turning up at the church hall on Leckhampton Road on Thursday evenings and doing drill. Since new recruits enlisted every week and uniforms took a month to become available, at any one time the corps comprised a mixture of boys properly kitted out as junior fascists and those wearing the default school outfits of grey shirts and sweaters.

Once a month, instead of drilling, we would do a combination of PT and games – British Bulldog, Pirates – in the church hall. This was so much more fun than drilling we should perhaps have foregone the pseudo-military trimmings and joined a gymnastics club instead. What kept us going was the prospect of taking

part in the parades through Cheltenham on the first Sunday of every month. At the head of the march were the adult officers in fully militarised uniforms which, though impressive, could never quite disguise the fact that one of them was Dave Sully's dad from Fairfield Avenue. After the grown-ups came the drum major and the rousing band of the CLB, followed by us Juniors, some in proper uniforms – dark navy shirt, cap and shorts – the rest traipsing gamely along in their school clothes. A jumble-sale army of kids, we looked like a combination of an apprentice version of Protestant marching bands and a deep generational prequel to *Dad's Army*.

As with many things one eagerly embraced as a child, the JTC turned out to be a bit of a bore. Not as boring as Sunday School which served the useful purpose, after about four weeks, of putting me off religion for life, but I began to look forward to the Thursday night gatherings with steadily diminishing enthusiasm. The comparison with Sunday School is not accidental. The JTC, after all, was a subset of the *Church Lads'* Brigade. From the singing of hymns and prayers at morning assembly at school, to organisations like these, the C of E had all sorts of claims on our attention and loyalty; none of them stuck, partly because all of them came freighted with a taint of boredom which has perhaps been insufficiently celebrated. My dad had, in his words, 'no time for the Royals' and that probably laid the foundation for my own subsequent loathing, which manages somehow to surpass itself with each passing year. But being obliged to sit through the historic tedium of the Prince of Wales's black-and-white investiture on a flickering telly at Naunton Park – that was the real crucible of radical republicanism.

Those Sunday parades also began to seem like a trudge, but there were two further incentives for sticking with the JTC. First, there was a week's 'training' under canvas in the Welsh countryside. This wasn't all it was cracked up to be either. From an early age the talk at home about soldiering had involved something called jankers, and in Wales I got to experience this – peeling hundreds of potatoes – first hand. That was worse than doing school work but some parts of the week were fun: swimming in the river, fishing, cross-country hiking, clambering over obstacles, having sing-songs round the jolly old campfire. The combination of swimming and fishing, however, did have an unfortunate consequence. One of the swimmers got a fish hook caught in his calf. The hook had to be cut out and the boy was held down, without anaesthetic, while this improvised operation took place. But *did* it take place? No one actually saw it, but we all heard about what was widely agreed to be the highlight of the week. And if it didn't happen but was instead some kind of fable, then what message was enacted by this conjured parable? That swimming and fishing don't mix?

Much looked forward to, the camp was itself a stepping stone on the way to something else: a gathering of the CLBs and JTCs from all over the country in Coventry. We travelled there, to our little Nuremberg, in a hired coach and marched through the streets to the cathedral for a service. I abandoned the JTC shortly after this climactic assembly, but as my military career was drawing to a close I got a first taste of something that would become a lifelong passion and need. Standing in the pews and singing, sitting and listening to the interminable readings, gazing at the hypnotically radiant stained-glass windows – all of this induced an overwhelming sleepiness in me. I wasn't physically tired but I couldn't keep my eyes open. I nodded off, jolted awake as my head pitched forward, and then drifted off again. I date this as my first nap.

Since we're on this Everest-like note – first person with one leg to make it to the summit, first person to record a chart-topping country-and-western album there – this seems the place to mention another sleep-related first that occurred just before the big march on – *in* – Coventry. We were working on a special project in class and had to apply ourselves to a task involving quiet individual thought. The teacher said we could shut our eyes if that helped us think better but this didn't mean we could fall asleep. Mark Harwood asked me if I was going to shut my eyes.

'Yes,' I said. 'I sleep better that way.'

My first joke!

After driving from Fairfield Walk and parking the always-gleaming Victor on Hall Road where Yo, Daryl and Tina lived (number 48), my dad and I walked along the network of paths that took us to his allotment. Worn bare except for fringes of grass at the edges, these narrow paths were raised slightly, like bridges across the patches of cultivated earth on either side. The route never varied, and I recognised some of the men working on their plots, bending over to pluck vegetables from the soil or leaning on spades to call out greetings which always contained some mention of the weather. Enthusiastic endorsement – 'Lovely sunshine!' – was rarely unalloyed, cloudless, was always qualified by notes of anxiety ('Too hot!') or threat (rain, thunderstorms).

The allotments were all pretty much the same size, featuring a similar range of vegetables, but each was

subtly imbued with the personality of the person cultivating it. Ours was one of the neatest. There were rows of root vegetables and onions; runner beans climbing up canes; rhubarb growing through upturned buckets, flaky with rust. Under glass cloches (a word I have not used for at least forty-five years, since the days when I thought they were galoshes) were more delicate plants whose names I didn't know. At the far end of our plot was a shed (lop-sided, though less rickety than many of its neighbours) secured with a padlock – disproportionately large, given that the door itself remained vulnerable to incursion. Always the first thing my dad did was to unlock the shed as if letting himself into the allotment through a conceptual or symbolic back door. From the shed he brought out faded newspapers which he stuffed into the pierced and rusted drum used for bonfires. (Writing this and remembering what I said earlier about Battledown Hospital, I am struck by how much rust there was in my childhood; was it, more generally, a rustier epoch or has it only *become* rustier in retrospect, part of the active corrosion of memory?) He was always building bonfires. Everyone on the allotments did this, as if to communicate with everyone else, by way of the most grammatically rudimentary smoke signal, that they were there. The bonfire was like a sign in a shop saying 'Open for Business', though each outlet was devoted exclusively to self-sufficiency, a way of avoiding commerce. We never arrived early in the day so some of the neighbouring plots were already open, staffed by lone and stooping figures, bonfires smouldering. No one worked quickly, only at the speed of the drifting smoke.

My dad was digging up potatoes with his fork – the agricultural equivalent of a trident, more glamorous and weapon-like than the dull spade – heaving clumps of earth into the air and picking out potatoes, glowing faintly, from the dark soil. I helped too, with my small fork: helped in the two childhood senses of 'got': first, in the way, and then fed up. After ten minutes he suggested I do some weeding, which was even worse than digging potatoes. The purpose of life, as I understood it, was to keep weeds at bay: a losing battle, ultimately, but won, in the short term, simply by not losing (which was how the Battle of Britain was won). I didn't grasp, back then, how the various elements involved in this situation, these tasks, would reconfigure themselves in the years to come. The purpose of life is to keep boredom at bay and this turns out to be a demanding and interesting task – as long as you're winning.

I wandered off. It was fine, back then, to wander off. What was the worst that could happen? That you might fall from one of the narrow paths or tread accidentally on someone's plants? I stopped to speak with Ron, who leant on his spade – support being as much a part of the spade's function as digging – and pushed his cloth cap back on his forehead. 'Look at your dad over there,' he said. 'He's a hard worker, isn't he?' It was true. He aimed to grow all the carrots, peas, potatoes and other vegetables that we would need to live on in the event of a catastrophic collapse that was indistinguishable from the normal functioning of the economy. The war was over but we continued digging for a more elusive victory that, in turn, bore a curious resemblance to defeat. Few bits of land in England were more intensively cultivated than this corner, beneath the summer sky and clouds of Leckhampton. Beyond the allotments was the grass of the recreation park – empty except for the net-less goalposts that made it look emptier still. Always, at some stage, my time at the allotment involved waiting for my dad to finish: another incremental demonstration of the need for patience that served only to make chronic impatience a defining trait of my character.

At last my dad said, 'You can start putting the tools away if you like, and water the spring onions.'

I dragged the spades and forks into the shed that smelled of dried dirt and the old newspapers – the *Daily Mirror* and the *Gloucestershire Echo* – piled on a rusted metal chair, resigned to their fate, knowing that their days were numbered, that however sensational their stories might once have been, they would soon be heading for the bonfire of local history. A ball of coarse string hung from a long nail. Sunlight shone through knot-holes in the wood. Stretched out in a corner, a cobweb looked intricately new – the only thing at the allotments that did; everything else was rooted in the past.

I took the metal watering can outside to the big drum next to the shed. Insects hummed and floated on the dark surface of the old rainwater – full, still, of reflections of its distant ancestors the clouds. (My mum often spoke of how, growing up in Shropshire, she and her sisters washed their hair in rainwater, how soft it made girls' hair. Some kind of arcadia was always implied by such remarks while simultaneously being consigned to a vanished, more primitive past: surely people only washed their hair in rainwater because they didn't have proper water, coming out of taps?) It was easy to reach over and dunk the watering can into the water but it grew quickly heavy, even when only half full. I poured water on some plants from as high as possible, maximising damage to the soil, and then my dad came and filled the watering can to the brim. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and his chest showed redly above the white string vest in the V of his open shirt. He swilled the dirt from his hands in the drum and locked up the shed. We called goodbye to Ron and began walking back along the narrow path through the allotments, each carrying a

canvas bag – one bulging with manly potatoes, the other small with boyish carrots and radishes. Any radish, even now, looks like it has been grown in and imported from my dad's allotment.

Off to the side of the allotments, tucked behind a tall wire fence, were two grass tennis courts. We couldn't hear anything from our patch but, as we walked back to Hall Road, sounds became audible: the pock of balls, the occasional call of 'Good shot!' and, if a doubles match was in progress, laughter. At one point the main path took a sharp right angle, almost by the corner of the surrounding fence, so that at the very moment we came closest to the courts we began to move away from them. We rarely stopped – I had no interest in the game – but sometimes we *paused* to watch the men and women, always in whites, running, serving, rallying, hitting the ball into the net: playing tennis. The location was so discreet and the space occupied so small, it was not so much a private club as a secret one: an enclave of county recreation and leisure nestled up against a default of allotted subsistence. Looking at an aerial view on Google now it seems that each court took up the space of approximately two allotments. There was, to be sure, no class-based animosity, no urge among those who toiled voluntarily on their plots of earth to tear down the fence, dig up the courts and extend the allotments in the name of forced collectivisation so that more potatoes and radishes could be grown. And my dad liked tennis, had played in his youth, would take up his racquet again in a modest way when I became interested in playing in the early 1970s.

My wife and I sometimes walked to the allotments when we were visiting my parents during the long months of my mum's dying. We went back again in September 2022. It was all the same as it had been when I was a kid, just a little more hemmed in by houses. The tennis courts were still there, in terrible condition because of a long drought followed, just a few days before, by heavy rain. People were playing (two lots of doubles), undeterred by wayward bounces, old enough to look like they might be the very same people I'd watched when I was ten and they were in their twenties.

I couldn't remember exactly which plot had been ours. It's possible that the plots had been slightly redrawn, but that didn't matter. The trees, I suppose, were the same trees that had been there when I was a boy. The sky overhead was as it had always been, and there was a strong sense of ... not permanence – that's a quality associated with monuments – but of protected and unchanging continuity. The allotments – on land owned by the Church and thereby protected against the lobbying of developers – were unencroached on, a refuge from commerce.

Silently, without our noticing (until we did), three deer had drifted into view. They sniffed, nibbled, went about their business. Like many natural things they were a nuisance, chewing up anything they could eat, but, from our sightseers' perspective, loveliness itself. Their silence – enhanced by big, listening ears – made them insubstantial, almost an emanation of the place rather than a threat to it. What I would like to say, to claim, to believe, is that I felt like the boy I had been, but I didn't; I felt like who I am now, conscious of a straining for the passage of time to dissolve. The similarity, perhaps, was how the place, though subtly different, had remained the same – as had I. Sky and trees: something about time, its persistence, seemed elusively present, to hand. There was a swirl of cloud, heat and weather ... The deer were a new phenomenon, they never wandered in here back in the sixties, when there was enough for them to eat elsewhere, though I don't know where that elsewhere might have been or what it is they eat.

Brian Jones, founding member of the Rolling Stones, was born in Cheltenham, attended the grammar school, and died in 1969 at the age of twenty-seven. His father had been an aircraft designer at Gloster Aircraft Company where my dad began his apprenticeship in November 1936. He was sixteen and completed the apprenticeship in November 1940. GAC had been taken over by Hawker in 1934, and in 1939 the first Hawker Hurricane came off the production line in Hucclecote. (Hence the choice of a Hurricane as my first Airfix model.) When the weather was nice my dad and his mates ate their lunchtime sandwiches outside, watching the Hurricanes they'd helped build taking to the Gloucestershire skies. And they built a lot of them: five a day when production was at its peak, 2,750 by March 1942. A year before that GAC began producing Hawker Typhoons (a model I only got round to relatively late in my modelling career), over 3,000 of them. My dad was there, part of this massive endeavour, until he was called up. According to his record of service:

GSE 1.6.44–29.1.45 (Ground Support Equipment)

REME: 30.1.45–20.9.47 (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers)

He spoke very little about his experience in the army, not because he had seen action and was traumatised by it but because he spoke very little about any aspect of his past. Actually, that's largely but not *quite* true. The bulk of his military service was spent in India. Until he was persuaded by my mum to go on a coach trip to France when they were both in their seventies, this was the only time he had ever spent abroad and he retained a lifelong, albeit passive interest in the subcontinent. The distinction may be unsustainable but while he was not interested in talking about the army, he was ready to talk about India: the heat, the poverty, the food, the dirt, the disgusting way some of his fellow soldiers treated the local people. From the age of seventeen I started eating curries in – and getting takeaways from – Cheltenham's three or four Indian restaurants. When he tasted the food I'd brought home, he'd say it was nothing like the curry he'd had in India. This was strange and slightly irritating because unlike the Vesta curries I'd enjoyed as a boy (beef!) the stuff in the foil containers was, I claimed, 'authentic'. He was never clear about how it differed from whatever it was he'd eaten in India, just stubbornly insisted that it was. My mum was on the side of neither son nor father but expressed her opinion of whatever it was I was authentic-ally spooning up from the Star of India with the single word 'pap'.

The documentary record of my dad's time in the army is scant. There's a letter from his mum dated 11 February 1945: 'I am sending the Photos on. I had already sent the proofs when your letter came. So we left it for you to decide which ones you liked best but we like the one we have already got of you smiling. We forget how you were looking in the other one but the 2 we do not like are the ones where you are looking very serious and one where your eyes look a bit funny.'

There is another much-redirected letter from his mum – sent to India on 1 October 1946 and then returned to 2 Leckhampton View, Shurdington:

I hope your feet will continue to keep all right now. Of course we know how the hot weather tells on your feet. Yes John I am glad to say I am got all right again but I had a month under the Dr.

PS We had Les out Sunday and we told him you had been in hospital with your feet and he said he knew what it was like.

That's the extent of the wartime correspondence, but from a few official papers I can trace some of his movements:

Bangalore, 17 February 1946

Victoria Memorial Gardens, Calcutta, January 1947

Train from Barrackpore to Deolali, 10 June 1947

Train ticket from York to Cheltenham, 6 July 1947

He returned to GAC, gained a certificate for twenty-five years' service to the company ('A Member of the Hawker Siddeley Group') but on 27 July 1962 was made redundant 'due to closure of factory'. That's when he took the night job at Nylon Spinners. After that, to his great relief, he was employed by Spirax Sarco – later rebranded or sold off to another company called Heat Transfer – where he worked in an office as 'a planning engineer'. It was a source of pride that he wore a jacket and tie to work.

Based on a few further letters from his mum I've worked out that he had an operation to remove a kidney in 1949 – a boon of the early days of the NHS. This left him with a huge scar running from close to his spine round to his side like a stretch of fleshy barbed wire. When we wrestled after watching the wrestling on Saturday afternoons it was an unbreakable rule that I was never to hit him in the back because he could not risk any damage to his remaining kidney. I never learned what it was that caused the other kidney to malfunction. That is in keeping with his extreme reticence concerning everything about himself – and about everything else too. Had he been capable of duplicity he would have been a natural spy. As it was his absolute discretion was used exclusively in the service of safeguarding a privacy no one had any interest in breaching. Unless by 'interest' one means generally accepted levels of interaction with the world. When I was having my hair cut at the barbershop on Bath Road (the Greeks, as it was generically known), the obligation to sit still focused my attention on the multiple verrucas on my foot. Verruca treatment was brutally simple: a green patch was stuck to the sole of the foot in order to soften the verruca, which was

then scraped out by Doc Bracey whom I'd visited, painfully, right before coming here for a haircut. I started crying and the barber – astonished that his hair-cutting skills could have elicited such an extreme expression of displeasure – asked what the problem was. After consulting with me, my dad told him 'Foot trouble'. It was the kind of low-voiced, confidential and generalised euphemism a mother might have used if obliged to explain that her daughter was experiencing her first period pains: 'Lady trouble'. (It was also, I realise now, an echo of the mysterious foot trouble that had landed him in hospital in India.) Some years later when we sold our house on Fairfield Walk the estate agent asked if he could put up a 'Sold' sign. My dad declined, presumably on the grounds that this would draw retrospective attention to the fact that it had been put on the market without the benefit of a 'For Sale' sign. A staunch Labour voter, he would never have a 'Vote Labour' poster in our windows.

The upside of his extreme discretion was a love of surprises – not dramatic ones, just things like not letting my mum know that we had bought her a box of Milk Tray on Valentine's Day until we presented her with the gift, accompanied by a card quoting from the Bond-style high-action advert: 'And all because the lady loves Milk Tray.' It was a lovely ritual, repeated year after year, even though the lady in question didn't like Milk Tray or any chocolates for that matter. This did not diminish her appreciation of the gesture; like Imperial Leather soap, Milk Tray was an expression of indulgence unrestrained by any considerations of expense (partly because this was, as the Imperial Leather advert explained, 'luxury you can afford'). Naturally, most of the contents of the Milk Tray were eaten by me, first the ones I knew I liked from the top layer and then, when that top layer had been decimated, the same items from the bottom layer. This bottom layer also came to include what my Auntie Hilda called 'spit-backs' from the top layer: half-eaten choices that I'd liked the look of – based on the legend – but then turned against when I took a bite. And so, to avoid waste, they were returned to the box for someone else – my dad – to finish off.

Aside from India – an experience so exceptional that it can't be factored into any analysis – my dad had no interest in his past precisely because it was past. I say this but I wonder if it might be simpler and more accurate to say that he had almost no interests at all. His 'interest' in India did not involve finding out more about it or keeping up with what was happening there. Even activities that might be termed hobbies – making wine, repairing and building stuff in his garage – were not things that interested him; they were just tasks to be undertaken. He liked watching rugby and cricket on telly but he didn't *follow* either sport with the passion and dedication of a fan. If he had been denied any of the things that he took pleasure in he would not have felt particularly put out. A list of the things he was indifferent to would constitute a mirror image of what, for many people, might constitute a rich and enjoyable life: books, beer, films, cars, music. He never invested himself wholeheartedly in anything except saving money. Wealthy businessmen say that the money is just a way of keeping score and I think he liked saving money because that was a tangible, easily measurable way of monitoring his quality of life. He was interested in me, obviously, with all the love and pride that a father brings to an only child, but that was programmed into the biological fact of our blood relationship.

I wonder if, as a younger man, his engagement with the world was more extensive. And even if the answer to that is 'no' or 'not significantly' I suspect it was not so unusual for someone of his class, his generation, to be like that. At the risk of putting it over-dramatically, his interests were so tightly bound up with a kind of subsistence-level relation to the world – survival in an era of gradually increasing prosperity – that there was nothing left over for the extraneous realm of culture or even leisure pursuits (drinking, holidays). His allotment was a hobby of sorts but it had the slightly burdensome quality of an obligation – the constant challenge of weeds to be kept at bay, seeds to be planted – that a hobby never does. He went to the allotment often and willingly enough but never viewed it as a refuge, a place to get away (from my mum). He never looked forward to going there, but then I think it's true to say that he never particularly looked forward to *anything* except coming home from work. My mum often commented on how content he was. In later life she said this all the time, part of the persistent buzz of commentary, kept up and endlessly repeated, that was perhaps a sign of her own discontent, of a dissatisfaction so long-thwarted as to be barely perceptible as such, even to her.

The idea of contentment was closely related to that of acceptance. Accepting one's lot – however little that lot amounted to – was a staple of familial discourse. From an early age I was home-schooled in notions of acceptance I later found entirely unacceptable. If this happened or that happened, if this or that befell you, you'd have to learn to accept it. In my mum's case, this can be traced right back to the day she was born; more generally, to the kind of subsistence existentialism that came from growing up in the 1930s.

Things improved over time; the 1960s were obviously better than the 1930s (as symbolised by the Vauxhall Victor) by any kind of gauge; they were beneficiaries of political change, especially with regard to the opportunities on hand for their son, but the soil in which they were rooted was that of scarcity. They were an inevitable product of centuries of rural life in which obligations and hardships greatly outweighed all possibilities of treats or abundance. That's why the lady really did love her box of Milk Tray, even if she didn't like the chocolates inside it.✧

It needs to be emphasised: I did not grow up in poverty. There was never any shortage of anything we wanted, though what we wanted was delineated and defined in a way that is perfectly compatible with – perhaps even a symptom of – poverty. Many times, when I asked my dad if I could have something that had taken my fancy in a shop, he responded, 'You don't want that.' To which I wanted to reply, 'But I *do*.' And then, after a while, I stopped wanting things. (I now wonder if he was unconsciously using 'want' in the earlier, archaic sense of 'lack', a distinction consumer capitalism has since pledged all its energies to rendering obsolete.) The constant calculation of cost was redundant since the result was always and inevitably that everything cost too much. Nothing was ever reckoned to be cheap. My dad's reaction to any price quoted by shop assistants was always a stunned '*How much?*' I don't recall him ever exclaiming, with delight, '*That's cheap!*' Even before the massive injection of cash into the Premiership, his judgement about the transfer fees for or wages paid to any footballer was absolute and uncompromising: 'No one is worth that much.' The key word in these and other exchanges is 'much' and it illustrates how much emphasis was placed on its opposite: how little we wanted, how readily we could make do with less. Partly this was because the idea of pleasure or indulgence played no part in my father's make-up. There were, he pronounced in the course of a later discussion of the town's – and by extension, the nation's – drinking habits, 'too many pubs already'. Too much, too many: always he was at odds with any suggestion of the abundance which was increasingly declaring itself as one of the goals not just of the economy or even of liberal democracy but of life itself. The spirit of wartime and post-war rationing – themselves built on the thin and therefore, in this context, extraordinarily fertile soil of the 1930s – had been internalised to the extent that it continued without the need for vouchers or any kind of external monitoring. Rationing, in my dad's consciousness, never went away. He was like one of those Japanese soldiers, eking out a living in the jungle, indifferent to the way that the war and its attendant privations had come to an end.

At a shop in Los Angeles I recently tried on a pair of Japanese jeans. When the price was quoted, I responded with a shocked '*How much?*' This was a tribute to my dad and, since I bought them, an indulgence (the expression, I mean, not the purchase).

There was much that was admirable in my parents' relation to money, and while in some respects it was out of step with a society that was becoming increasingly affluent there were still plenty of residual signs, in the world beyond our house, of a more frugal, less wasteful attitude to life. In order to be exempt from the horrible perk of the welfare state known as free school milk, I had to get a special note from my mum saying I was allergic. I wasn't, I just hated the taste, unless it was with Weetabix heaped with sugar. On its own milk tasted like something out of a cow. Even though this marked me as an outsider and weakling – the strength-giving properties of milk were spinach-like in their potency – that was a small price to pay for not having to drink or even smell what in hot weather was on the way to becoming semi-liquid, yellowy cheese (which I also couldn't stomach), but I was conscious of missing out on a side-effect of the mid-morning milk break: contributing the silver foil bottle tops that would go towards Guide Dogs for the Blind. Fortunately, I was still able to do my bit by bringing in our tops from home. This endeavour might seem like a forerunner of twenty-first-century recycling schemes but, in the other direction, it was also a peacetime equivalent of the wartime initiative of donating pots and pans to be converted into munitions.

Almost everything back then could be repaired – the corollary is that things seemed to go wrong more often – and this involved considerable inconvenience: when, for example, the telly was taken back to Mr Mustoe's shop in Tivoli and from there, if the problem exceeded his remit, back to the manufacturer. The appeal and expense of new things was offset by a market not just for second-hand but reconditioned appliances. Eric and Dink's daughter Ann married Don, a Londoner who plied a profitable if dusty trade in reconditioned vacuum cleaners. Alongside the reconditioned was the widespread availability of so-called seconds: goods that had fallen below whatever standard was necessary to qualify them as firsts. Whereas the term 'second-rate' is wholly derogatory, ours was a world in which the sub-standard came as standard,

was not only entirely acceptable – no sacrifice was involved – but, once the cost differential had been factored in, preferable. In some ways it was a denial of progress, in other ways it looked beyond a wasteful idea of progress – trade in your functioning phone the moment a new iteration comes on the market – to a reconditioned idea of progress that is progressive and sustainable. ‘How many things there are in the market place of which I have no need,’ said Socrates, a remark tacitly endorsed by my dad – and, increasingly, by me. Unlike my dad, though, I’m not *indifferent* to luxury brands. Occasionally I find myself walking past a branch of Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci or whatever; I never go in but even on the pavement, outside these places of heightened expense, I know, almost as a spasm of physical revulsion, that I’m passing sites of cheapened value.

Not for the only time in this book I realise that something I’ve written – with absolute conviction and faithfulness to my sense of the historical record – has to be qualified. There *was* a brief window – so brief that in memory it had closed – when we bought into the consumer boom of the late sixties. As well as the Victor we also acquired a mono record player in a blue leatherette case. This must have been in late 1966 because one of the first singles we bought was ‘Reach Out’ by the Four Tops (my choice). A few months later, in addition to albums of hits by Jim Reeves and Glenn Miller (parents’ choices) we also bought the Beatles’ double A-side ‘Penny Lane’ / ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’. After that flurry the craze for music went into remission, only returning, with progressively intensifying fever, in my early teens. The reason for the fizzle-out, for all records dropping out of the hit parade, is easy to fathom. The Victor had a purpose – we could drive to places in it – and compared with the initial outlay the incidental costs, while never to be underestimated and always to be factored in to any journey, were relatively low. But music – the weekly release of new records, all clamouring to be heard and bought – opened up a potentially limitless source of expenditure which could quickly and vastly exceed the original cost of the machine. The record player was, by definition, the thing on which records were played but it was also an insidious portal to a world of unrestrained expense. Long before the term ‘mission creep’ entered military parlance my dad had an unerring eye for what might be called purchase creep.

My mum liked Tom Jones and Andy Williams but her real passion was ‘Deck of Cards’, the moving recitation of a soldier caught and charged for playing cards in church during the North Africa campaign.* While my dad quite enjoyed Glenn Miller he never chose to put on a record, never once came home from work, loosened his tie and said he was in the mood to hear ‘In the Mood’ or ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’. He would quite happily have gone through life never hearing a note of music which could, in any case, be heard on the radio for free. And so, after dipping our toes into the rocky waters of pop consumption, the record player fell silent.

One summer Uncle Daryl helped my dad – or rather my dad helped him, since he was a bricklayer – build a garage for the Victor. It seems a waste to have devoted all that garden space to house a car that could have sat quite happily out on the street. If you drive down Fairfield Avenue now you have to do so carefully and slowly as cars are squeezed into every inch of both sides of the street. Back then it was a parker’s dream. You could practically turn off the engine and let the car glide to a halt. And those were the days before vandalism, more than a decade before my friends and I went on the rampage in the town centre, smashing shop windows and sprinting over parked cars.

Pre-garage, when the car lived out on the street, in the wild, in all weathers, my friends and I sat inside it and played at driving, depressing the brake and accelerator, twisting the wheel a bit. Nothing could go wrong, there was no possibility of harm (the handbrake was too strong to be released) but even with all our childish capacity to pretend and imagine – as we did in the cupboard-tank beneath the stairs – the car was too big for us. And besides, we had other, funner vehicles of our own: trollies. This was the name given to any three- or four-wheeled, cobbled-together contraption you could sit on and race down some kind of hill, ideally the steep, slightly curving incline running alongside the grounds of Emmanuel Church. It could be the rusty wheel-base – or occasionally more extensive remains – of a pram. It could be a plank with axles and wheels somehow attached. Cushions provided added comfort but did not come as standard. Brakes were unheard of but more advanced models had at least some capacity to be steered. I was the beneficiary of a sleek piece of engineering, constructed by my dad: a piece of wood, carefully cut, with two big back wheels and, at the front, two small wheels on an axle secured with a bolt and capable of being steered with a combination of feet and skipping rope. Adequately if not perfectly placed to observe the closing stages of

some of these trolley races (the high-speed Emmanuel run was out of sight), the Victor must have had mixed feelings about the reduction of its stationary life from the open range of Fairfield Avenue to the viewless comfort of solitary confinement in the garage.

After spending his days on a building site, Daryl came over in the long evenings and at the weekends to build our garage. I sat in the wheelbarrow, wearing my cowboy hat, watching while my mum kept him plied with sandwiches and drinks – tea at first and then homemade wine – as the garage gradually emerged. The car moved into the garage, obviously, that was the idea, but it seemed for several months as if a new building had set up home in our garden.

My mum was born on a farm in Worthen, Shropshire, in 1925, one of three girls. Her father, Geoff Tudor, was a farm labourer, illegitimate and illiterate. So her options in life were limited – she always said that she was raised to milk cows. That makes her sound like Hardy's Tess but really she was more like Tess's younger *sister*. My Auntie Hilda, who was due to go into service (a step up from milking) and who was extremely beautiful, came to the attention of a public schoolboy, the splendidly named Charles Backus – in nearby Shrewsbury – married him and ended up living in London where she acquired an absurdly posh accent. She eventually dumped Charles Backus in favour of a self-made millionaire, the confusingly named CB, who (among other treats) took her on the maiden voyage of the *QE2*. Her life was extraordinary and she said extraordinary things like 'A stiff prick knows no conscience' or 'This meal is absolutely bloody.' One day she turned up at Fairfield Walk with CB in his white Rolls-Royce. It was one of the great moments of my childhood. Since it was also one of the iconic expressions of the larger process of social democratisation – in the pop culture of the late 1960s someone was always turning up at a terraced house in their white Roller – you could be forgiven for doubting if this particular iteration of it really took place. But it did! CB gave me and Mark Harwood a pound to share between us (my dad gave Mark a ten-shilling note for his half and pocketed the pound to make sure that I saved it).

In addition to our Sunday afternoon outings, we drove twice a year to visit my mum's relatives in Shropshire. We would map out the route each time we went, listing the towns to head for and pass through as though we had never done the journey before, were perpetually undertaking it for the first time. The route took us through Ledbury, Leominster and then Ludlow, a sequence simultaneously geographical and alphabetical. My dad was a member of the RAC – our car had the identifying blue badge on the radiator grille, in contrast to the yellow of the rival AA – and any RAC man coming the opposite way, whether in a car or on a motorbike, acknowledged us as we passed. We never broke down and so although this fraternal greeting – a quasi-militaristic wave, halfway to a salute – represented the full extent of practical benefits derived from membership it was also a tersely coded expression of the immense psychological reassurance offered to travellers from Gloucestershire venturing into the terra incognita of Shropshire. These trips therefore had the quality of adventure even if my dad had a knack, not of ruining but always slightly letting the fun out of things, like a very slow, hard-to-identify puncture. If there was a big pool of water across the road we never sped through it, sending fins of water spraying up on either side of the car, as Tina's dad, Daryl, would have done; we always did the correct thing and slowed down to an amphibious crawl. As we approached Worthen there was the option of taking a fabled road known as the Monkey: steep, winding and narrow. On our trips anywhere we never took the straight, new and glamorous motorways but, equally, we tended to stay clear of this old and twisting tail of a road and take instead the A-whatever-the-middle-of-the-road alternative was called. When we did opt for this mythically dangerous beast my dad applied himself to the fierce gradients and bends with a seriousness that rendered it almost as flat as the road more frequently travelled. On one occasion when, despite agreed-upon expectations, we ended up taking the normal route, my cousin Tina asked why we had not taken the Monkey (as Uncle Daryl *always* did). 'Because I'm the driver,' came the reply from the front seat. He didn't snap exactly but he had announced his authority with excessive force. The driver: what unquestionable command and responsibility that role denoted back then! On at least two occasions, however, the driver's skill and power were not quite enough to drain all drama from the trip. There was the time he got pulled over and fined for overtaking on an unbroken white line. In retrospect this seems not so much unlucky as inconceivable since we never overtook anyone, anywhere. We were always *being* overtaken and every time we were overtaken my mum would say 'He's in a hurry.' Intended as a rebuke it had the opposite effect, of making me think how exciting and desirable it must be to be in a hurry, as symbolised by the world of never-taken motorways.

How that fine must have weighed on my dad's shoulders, adding massively and unjustly to the unavoidable expenses of petrol and wear and tear on the engine, tyres and brake lights.

We were further slowed down by another of my dad's redundant economies. Because he never put more than half a tank of petrol in the car we were constantly having to stop at garages to fill (half) up. This miserly policy backfired when we ran so dangerously low on petrol that he had to turn off the engine and cruise silently down every curving hill to save fuel until we came to the reassuring blue, white and red logo of an Esso station. That was fun!

Even when uneventful, the journey to my grandad's house was always the highpoint of these trips. Since I hated staying at my grandparents' one might think that the drive back to Cheltenham was the best part. It was a relief to be leaving, certainly, but the simple fact of return – to the familiar, to home – meant that it lacked the element of excitement that is always there, in spite of the destination, on any journey out.

It's easy to itemise what I disliked about these visits. First: the house; second, everything else. The house was damp, smelled of damp even in the middle of summer. In winter it smelled of smoke and damp, of damp smoke; year-round there was the dry haze of my grandmother's incessant smoking and, somehow, even though there were no cows in the immediate vicinity, an ingrained lurk of dairiness. Although this was the smell of poverty, a wealth of ingredients went into its creation: rural life, hard graft, Methodism, centuries of bad weather. The backyard was the epicentre or ground zero of damp: mossy stone slabs – with moss growing in the cracks like an aerial view of miniature bright green hedgerows – surrounded by high stone walls on one side and the walls of the house on the other. On clear days in the summer, like a prisoner allowed a brief period of exercise, the sun had an hour in which to bathe the yard in warm light that was often cold. The subterranean damp of the cellar was even damper than the damp yard, and had some extra quality too: damp *time*. The wooden steps to the cellar were bowed in the middle. Although there was an electric light, activated by a thin chain, I preferred to use my dad's Eveready torch; it felt more investigative. The beam picked out piles of logs with an axe buried atrociously in a chopping block. Light filtered in through the trap door making white highlights on the jet-black coal slumped beneath it. There was other stuff too: broken cases, wooden crates containing bulbs for planting, a car tyre, stiff sacks, broken wood. I came back up into the hall that smelled of cooking, a thick smell of inbred gravy. In the kitchen my grandmother – my mum's stepmother – was at the stove, cooking, cigarette in mouth. The house was big, there were many different parts to it, much to explore, but every part managed to be as horrible as every other, and though each part was different it all ended up being consistently horrible. There was no escape.

I slept in a room at the front of the house. At night, lights angled across the ceiling and walls as cars accelerated and changed gear to breast the hill. There was a wardrobe, huge and empty except for jangling hangers. The wallpaper was old and bubbled up in places, came loose from the wall near the skirting board. Everything about the house was more primitive than we were used to: instead of going to the toilet at night we kept potties under the beds and slopped out the yellow contents in the morning.

In one room there was an upright piano no one could play and some sheet music no one could read. The white keys on the piano were nicotine-yellow. No one *ever* played it. Thinking about the piano now I wonder what would have happened if a prodigy like Keith Jarrett had spent his summers in my grandparents' house. Would he have been able to crack the piano's implacable adherence to its code of silence? It was an amazing thing, that piano: a conceptual marvel in that it was not just unplayable; there was no music in it.

The house was separated from an often empty road by a low wall and narrow pavement. In the garden was an apple tree: crab apples, inedible, bitter, good for nothing except being placed in a line across the road where they'd be crushed, eventually, by cars and tractors. A few minutes up the road, to the right, was a field where my dad took me to kick a ball around but it was obviously not a real pitch, just a field – in the farming sense – on which lines had been unevenly painted and goalposts embedded. I never wanted to stay long so we'd go back to the house where I didn't want to be either. Through the wobbly glass of the windows in the living room and the piano room, stretching away from the road, was a view of the brooding fields and hills, a line of dark trees called the Callow on the skyline. The landscape was so heavy and ancient it was like passing back into a world that pre-existed civilisation as we knew it in Gloucestershire. This was not a childish delusion. It was there as a fact, a different relation to reality. When he was young my grandfather caught a gypsy stealing chickens and she put a curse on him. This was widely accepted as an explanation for all the bad luck and misfortune that befell him (such as having four daughters but no son). He used to be so strong that if you tied binder twine around his upper arm he could break free by flexing his biceps. I never saw him do that but his early life unfolded in another age, of mythical events, unverifiable sources and factual contradictions. Illegitimate and illiterate, he was a fatherless emanation of

the land itself but, as is often the case, this status, while acknowledged, was not accepted without embellishment. There were rumours that the man who had impregnated my great-grandmother had been a doctor, someone socially superior to the mother and the world my grandfather was born into and lived. The historic surname – Tudor! – was not enough or at least was insufficiently precise; it was necessary to lay claim to some professional ancestry even if no trace of this remained in any aspect of his life, character or circumstances. How close this world was – psychologically and historically if not geographically – to that of *Wuthering Heights* or Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*. In nearby Montgomery there was the Robber's Grave. Convicted of stealing a sheep and sentenced to death, the robber claimed that if he was innocent no grass would grow in the shape of a cross. We went there and, yes, there was a sort of bare patch. Martin's Pool was said to be bottomless but dangerous, too, because it was possible to become caught in the reeds that grew on the bottom. This was all part of the dark and brooding world of myth and half-truths but the darkest element was a matter of established historical record. My grandad's medals from the First World War were enclosed in the frame of a photograph of him as a young man in uniform who had served at the Somme. The immense weight of that single mossy syllable hung like a dark sun over everything.

The gypsy's curse was representative in that the stories were not tragedies so much as tales of misfortunes, injuries and wrongs suffered. Into this world of everyday wrongs had erupted the huge and historically verifiable wrong of the First World War, which itself became overgrown with the barnacles of myth like the hull of a ship scuttled and sunk in Scapa Flow. We had been told that my grandfather had tried to enlist when he was too young. That he had been turned away by the recruiting sergeant and told to come back in fifteen minutes when he was two years older – which he duly did. Except he was born in November 1893 so would have been twenty when war broke out. A common wartime story had become a matter of personal fact. My grandfather fought at the Somme but had all his teeth taken out, on spec, while in the army in Singapore. Are these two experiences compatible with each other? In a way it doesn't matter since the essential truth is that my grandfather suddenly found himself somewhere wholly other than where he was destined to be. He was part of the army of farm-labourers and field-workers who left the hard life of the land in 1914 only to find themselves digging and living in the trenches of the Western Front.

From the house in Worthen we would visit my mum's relatives in two other places. The Rowley was a farm owned by her cousin John Bunner, and his mother, Auntie Emmie. It was a weather-assailed, isolated, rambling, falling-apart place. That makes it sound remote and wild – exciting qualities – but to me as a child it just seemed decrepit and old. (How children hate old things! No wonder, given the chance, they prefer to watch TV or play on an iPad.) John Bunner had the distinctive much-washed quality of the hard-working farmer: a cleanliness that somehow had decades, maybe even centuries, of dirt caked into its collar. Auntie Emmie was a tiny wiry lady with the tenacious life-force of a thorny bush able, by virtue of its lack of abundant or attractive foliage – and by an unshakeable Methodist faith – to hold its ground in the teeth of any gale, meteorological, historic or political.

Our other trip was to Shrewsbury to stay with May and Mildred Hotchkiss, Auntie Twins, as they were known, who had raised my mum after her mother – their sister – had died and my grandfather remarried. They lived in a terraced house called Glendale Villa with another sister, Auntie Gertie, who bore such a close resemblance to Auntie Emmie that they might have been twins too. These two surviving pairs of sisters could not have been more physically different – Auntie Twins robust, imposing; Gertie and Emmie tiny – but all four were staunch Methodists and non-drinkers, so it was a cruel twist of fate that the air sagged with the smell of yeast from the nearby brewery. We parked the Victor outside a chapel, a few streets over from their house. 'If it's not safe here then it's not safe anywhere,' my mum concluded. My dad, being godless, took the added precaution of removing the rotor arm from the engine to disable the car and render it theft-proof.

Auntie Twins' house was a five-minute walk from the chapel, just across from the railway line. It was crowded not only with their hulking selves but with matching brown furniture. There were chairs in front of sideboards, dressers behind sofas and, behind everything else, layers of wallpaper on the sturdy interior walls. All the skirting boards and doors were painted in thick coats of chocolate brown. The coat-stand in the hall was heavily over-worked, even before the Twins added the coats and hats they'd worn to chapel. Although the word 'coat' has come up quite a bit here the real issue was 'milk': homogenised and pasteurised rather than simply pasteurised. My dad could not abide it, so every cup of tea, intended to punctuate the day with pleasure, became a small source of dissatisfaction. In his way, despite being hostile to all religion, in this bastion of Methodism he submitted, beverage-wise, to a continual mortifying of the

flesh, or of the mouth at any rate. None of this alters the fact that it was in this devotion-crowded house that I watched my first ever European football match on the Twins' small, not entirely receptive telly: a blurry Leeds United in all-white versus a team whose name I could probably discover but which I prefer to think of as a grey emanation, the ghost of football's televised past.

After the Twins had taken in the three girls – my mum, Hilda and the oldest sister, Rene – relations between the Hotchkisses and my grandfather were almost non-existent while relations between everyone else were merely strained. My grandad never liked Rene's husband, Doug, because Doug thought he was better than everyone else because he was a policeman, but this probably had less to do with Doug's behaviour or attitude than it was an expression of a more general aversion which was a restatement of the same reason: he was a policeman. The same logic could be used to argue that my grandad wasn't too keen on daughters either, because they were daughters. There was nothing wrong with their being girls except this limited their ability to perform the heavy-lifting of running a farm. A surfeit of milkmaids meant a shortage of labourers.

The personal and the generic are difficult to disentangle in other ways too. There were so many feuds, grievances, splits and resentments remembered and borne to the grave and beyond. After my grandfather remarried he was never again allowed into Glendale Villa; neither was Yo, the daughter he had with his new wife. Thwarted expectations of inheritance were another, constantly replenishing source of acrimony. Long-held grudges were proof of an often obscure but more binding form of loyalty and love. This was a moribund survival of the culture of an earlier social system when revenge was a duty and honour constantly tested: the residue of a time when justice was not handed over to the state to administer but was nourished primarily by an abiding sense of having been wronged; honour demanded that, if this wrong could not be avenged (because the state had made inroads into the practicalities but not the psychology of resolution and settlement), then it must always be remembered. An adult version of prolonged sulk – raised to the level of brooding dissatisfaction commensurate with the clouds routinely lowering over the Black Mountains – it sat quite comfortably alongside what might seem the contrary force of Methodism. Always there was some deeper, older force acting on my mother's family – deeper than socialism or the Labour Party or the largely irrelevant marketplace.

If wills were one cause of ill-feeling the other, not unrelated, ingredients of dispute and unhappiness were of course illegitimacy, or at least teenage pregnancy and shotgun marriage. Rene had three daughters, two of whom were adults by the time I got to know them. Mildred was married to Ray who worked in the sewers ('Best place for him,' joked Doug). Margaret was married to Joe, a hod-carrier of Polish descent who was a huge drinker. Their daughter, Kim, was my age and we played a game involving Dinky toys, pushing little cars around the thickly carpeted floor at Auntie Twins'. The imagined journeys undertaken by Kim's cars involved stopping off at a pub en route somewhere else and this somewhere else was always another pub. When I asked why her red Cortina was meandering all over the carpet she replied, 'The driver's had too much to drink.' It was said of Joe that if you filled a bath with beer he'd drink it. (I heard this said many times. In Shrewsbury few things were said only once. Everything was repeated over and over.) 'Beer this, lager that,' said my mum. 'It's all Joe ever thinks about.' This thirsty form of cognition was also having a bad effect on Ray. Joe got daft and sloppy drunk whereas Ray became nasty drunk. They must both have been young, in their twenties, had thick sideburns and parted hair slick with Brylcreem, and they were both starting to put on weight. Joe claimed that his work as a hod-carrier meant he could sweat it out – back then even footballers and their managers believed the same thing – but the sweating also kept the thirst raging. An air of moral disapproval attached itself to the pair of them as the smell of the brewery hung around the Twins' house. Chapel and pub: the abstemiousness of the former only increased the lure of the latter. Anyway, the message – the danger – was clear and the perils were the perennial favourites: early pregnancy and alcohol.

Mary, Rene's youngest daughter, was five or six years older than me and led a life very different to her sisters'. She moved from Shrewsbury to Bournemouth, where we had a holiday, spending time with her almost every day, when I was about twelve. Later she met and married the footballer Kevin Reeves, who subsequently played for Norwich, Man City and England. I'm not sure exactly what happened after that but it seems there was some kind of bust-up about tickets that Kevin had – or was meant to have – secured for Ray; either Ray failed to pay Kevin or was outraged that he was expected to pay, or Kevin failed to come up with the tickets that Ray had asked for. If only I'd paid attention to the details of this and numerous other familial interactions and mini dramas. Much that is here is written round the edges of what is missing; but everything is framed by the working title, rejected late in the day, after the manuscript was complete: *A Happening*.

Building the garage at Fairfield Walk was not Daryl's only experience of after-work work. Compared with the holidays he and Rhoda spent at my grandparents' house – where he was expected to work flat-out on repairs or construction – the time spent building our garage felt like a holiday. Later in life both he and Eric built their own houses after working as bricklayers in the day. I now know quite a few people who have built their own houses in the sense that they bought land and employed architects and project managers who in turn marshalled a team of bricklayers and Polish or Mexican labourers to do the work. Building in this sense means paying for everything, checking on progress and becoming frustrated by delays and cost over-runs. Eric and Daryl built their houses, brick by brick, in the evenings, at weekends and during the holidays.

The house Daryl built was high up Leckhampton Hill, on the way to Birdlip. There was a house there already but it required such extensive reconstruction it would have taken only slightly more effort to have knocked the whole thing down and started from scratch. It was in a lovely quiet spot and this quiet isolation proved its undoing. After they moved in the house kept getting burgled. Four times. It got to the point where Rhoda and Daryl dreaded returning to the house they'd built and long dreamed of moving to, for fear that it would have been broken into again and more of their stuff would have been stolen. Normally when you get home you feel a sense of relief that you are no longer on the way home and can put your feet up and watch telly. Rhoda said she felt relieved when she got home and there was still a TV to watch. And a sofa to sit on, joked Daryl. What frightened Rhoda most was what might happen if Daryl – the kindest of men, he had no physical fear of anyone – returned home while the burglary was in progress. Eventually they sold this burglary-cursed place and moved to a less idyllic but more secure location closer to town in Liddington Close.

Uncle Eric, who wasn't involved in building our garage but helped my dad with plenty of other jobs – concreting a path at Fairfield, putting in a new fireplace and concreting the drive at the house we moved to later – bought some land in Shurdington, not far from the Bell, the pub he went to just before last orders every night, after he'd spent the evening building his house, after he'd worked at his job as a bricklayer during the day. He kept saying that it nearly killed him, all this work, but it also did the opposite; it kept him alive. In 1993, he killed himself in his car. From a combustion of gases the car caught fire, destroying the garage and blackening the walls of the house he had built.✂

Eric had a lined and tanned face that seemed even more deeply sunburned because of a full head of white hair, combed back and stained nicotine-yellow at the front. He swore all the time – only ever 'bugger' and 'bloody' – in his deep rich Gloucestershire brogue. Daryl was younger, always fit and always in a good mood. Both of them, later, drank too much, especially Daryl who, according to my mum, would get so hopelessly drunk on barley wine or vodka that one night he fell asleep in his car in the car park of the Malvern. Because my mum never drank, her assessment of the quantity of booze people put away and the changes wrought on their characters could not be relied on.

Daryl James and Eric Bartlett: the loveliest, most generous uncles any boy or girl could ever have! Daryl never complained about anything; Eric complained all the time, but with a kind of stoical and comic enthusiasm. Eating his lunch one cold and wet winter day, he told me, his fried-egg sandwich had fallen on the ground of the site where he was working so he picked it up and ate this dirty, soggy thing, spitting out the grit that crunched in his teeth. He seemed in possession of some gritty quality of wisdom – generally, I mean, not specifically regarding egg sandwiches – that my dad ... Well, it would be easy and accurate to have completed that sentence with 'didn't have' but it would be more accurate to say 'wasn't interested in' or 'couldn't see the point of'. Once when we were visiting Auntie Twins in Shrewsbury they told us about a relative from Australia who'd come to stay with them a few weeks previously. A strange guest who never spoke. Not a word. 'What a wise man,' said my mum as if she were in the presence, recently vacated, of the reincarnation of the smiling monk who told Grasshopper those little parables in *Kung Fu*, with the added depth of a permanently activated mute button. I was confident enough by then to point out that the lack of words might also have expressed a complete lack of brain. But Uncle Eric was wise. At his funeral the vicar said Eric had emigrated from Guiting Power, a village fourteen miles away, before making Shurdington his home. The vicar described him as a stonemason. Which he was, but one day, as Eric ate hand-picked strawberries and discounted Wall's vanilla-yellow ice cream in our garden, I told him that he was a philosopher. I meant it absolutely – and still do, in a way that I don't when I think of people who call themselves philosophers because they're employed by the philosophy departments of universities: they're philosophy *teachers*. Eric had access to an understanding of life, its travails, demands and values. He didn't express this in academic papers that no one is expected to understand or even read, but if you looked in his

face or listened to him speak about what ‘some other bugger’ had done or said, you knew that he was someone who had entered as deeply into life as his circumstances permitted – so deeply as to render those circumstances simultaneously irrelevant and essential.

So, how did this hard-working and stoical builder come to be tucking into *strawberries* in our garden? Strawberries were expensive, appeared only seasonally and, as befitted a delicate delicacy, turned to mush in the event of excessive rain. We bought occasional punnets but the pleasure of eating the contents was compromised by the outrageous cost. So it was a huge change in habits of consumption – a revolution almost – when we began to pick our own strawberries, in bulk, at nurseries in the surrounding countryside, close to home in Shurdington, and slightly further afield near Evesham. Suddenly this once-rare fruit – this fruit of fruits – was there in abundance, ripe for the taking. Or unripe – it hardly mattered. Sometimes Keith came with us, or Rhoda, Daryl and Tina. Together we joined the row of hunched figures spread across the middle of an entire field of strawberries. A string stretched from one side of the field to control the progress of the pickers and ensure that a given area was picked clean before it was moved forward to the next row by a sheriff-like figure who banged in the new string-supporting pole with a mallet. Inevitably the strawberries immediately beyond the permitted row exerted a special allure and we regularly reached forward to grab these before they were officially available. No sign specifically warned against grazing or eating strawberries while you picked and we did that too, sometimes committing the double offence of picking and eating strawberries from the row ahead. By the time we finished picking we had already gorged ourselves on free strawberries, ill-advised though this was since they were presumably drenched in herbicide and pesticide. But who cared! That was a non-existent price to be paid for free strawberries. And so, picking, stretching and munching, we inched our way slowly across the field, filling our baskets with the biggest strawberries we could find. There were so many that Keith and I occasionally threw them at each other, bullet wounds of juice opening on our foreheads and shirts.

These were fun times but, looking back, I am struck by how once again our treat – our leisure – took the form of work. There we were, enjoying the fruits of our labour, obviously, but to an observer we must have looked like Millet’s *Gleaners* or Mexican fruit-pickers awaiting a Gloucestershire-born Cesar Chavez to organise us and negotiate a lower price per pound or a speedier advance of the string so that we could find bigger, fatter, sweeter strawberries more easily.

We arrived at the weigh-in with vast quantities of berries, paid and drove home, where we tucked into a proper extravaganza of washed strawberries, served with ice cream and sprinkled with gleaming sugar. For the next several days, with a steady diminution of pleasure, we ate strawberries all the time, like turkey after Christmas. (Eric was enjoying the fruits of this phase of plenitude when, several years after the first harvest, I told him he was a philosopher.) My parents, meanwhile, moved on to the next part of Operation Strawberry: making jam, which always involved – this is the only bit of the process I remember – the application of more and more sugar. Eventually all the strawberries were eaten – the last few bowls, inevitably, nothing but reddish mush: a kind of raw jam – or processed and jarred.

Some years we went back for a second picking but this repeat outing always lacked the freshness of the first; it was not until the following summer that we were once again primed and ready to appreciate the glory and plenitude of this exotic item of pure luxury.

That last section, you will have noticed, ended up being about sugar as well as strawberries – and how could it not! My childhood was saturated in sugar. I loved sugar on and in everything: Corn Flakes, Weetabix and porridge (Quaker and Scots Oats), obviously, but also bread and butter, tomatoes, raspberries. Fizzy drinks (Corona). Heaped spoons of sugar in tea and coffee (tainted, always, by the crinkled skin which formed on the surface and had to be delicately removed). All forms of Cadbury’s chocolate. Lucozade. Sugar and sugar-drenched jam in semolina. Sugary rice pudding. Sugar *anything*. So thoroughly did sugar permeate everything I ate – even, slightly later, yogurt, the first suggestion of what would later come under the heading ‘healthy eating’ – that I was not even conscious of sweetness, only of its intolerable absence. Nothing was ever *too* sweet – how could it be? – though certain things inevitably required more sugar (rhubarb: a multi-tablespoon dumping) than others (strawberries: a single teaspoon sprinkle). It wasn’t that I had a sweet tooth; I had a normal tooth, a tooth that craved sugar. Not for nothing were our most-desired foodstuffs known collectively as sweets. In America sweets are called candy, but ‘sweet’ is much better: an adjective that has achieved the status of noun and thing. And what things they were! Boiled sweets (that left one’s mouth feeling scalded), Opal Fruits (‘Made to make your mouth water’,

they made my *face* feel like it was bursting with sweat), sugar-coated fruit pastilles, fruit gums, chocolates and all the other variously flavoured and manifested forms of sugar. Far from discouraging this fondness for sugar, my parents instilled and then endorsed it by their own gradually increasing sugar intake, their absolute abhorrence of – more a kind of astonishment about – anything lacking in sugar. Tea without sugar was not just horrible to them; it was practically an abuse of their human rights. The assumption was that nothing really tasted of anything because the only taste that counted – the only requirement – was sweetness, sugariness. I must not exaggerate. We did not put sugar on chocolates or sweets, did not add sugar to Corona (pop) or Kellogg's sugar-coated Frosties or the aptly-named Sugar Puffs, because they were already so loaded with sugar it would have been impossible to make them taste more sugary. These were not drinks or food with sugar added; they were sugars in liquid or cereal form. Everything else *cried out* for sugar. Heaped spoons of it, from the dozens of packets stacked up in the pantry – partly hoarding in the face of potential shortage but also because even as a family of three we got through huge quantities of it at a phenomenal rate. Tate & Lyle: white granulated sugar with no Brooke Bond-style cards thrown in for educational good measure. (Why bother? Education of any kind could only have a detrimental effect on demand.)

Sugar, lovely sugar! Not the cause of obesity and harbinger of diabetes as we now think of it, but a source of pleasure, nutrition, energy and happiness. We are talking exclusively of *white* sugar. Even brown sugar was too sophisticated; an acquired taste with suggestions of a health fad, it was practically muesli or brown rice in granular form. My parents took pride in the way that we didn't eat sliced bread, never bought those limp packets of Mother's Pride, but it was always white bread that we prided ourselves on buying and slicing (though I was never allowed to cut it myself for fear that I might amputate a thumb), white bread which formed the basis of my favourite sandwiches: sugar sandwiches, loaded and crunchy with white sugar. And the extraordinary thing? It did us no harm! My mum and dad lived to eighty-five and ninety respectively and for the last twenty years of their long lives the tea they drank was so dense with sugar it was more like a thick, highly sweetened brown sludge than a drink. Have I got diabetes? Have I turned into a fat slob, a fat anything? Look at me: whippet-thin, fiddle-fit and raised almost exclusively on a diet of white sugar. On outings to the countryside we fed sugar cubes to horses, careful to keep the palms open and flat so the horses – who took to sugar like ducks to water – wouldn't chomp our fingers off in their eagerness to get their teeth into it. This proves that all God's children love sugar, even beasts in the field. Sugar! Say it loud, say it proud, say it with the remains of your teeth. Yes, the gnashers paid a price, but that was almost irrelevant since one's teeth were assumed to be in the process of corroding anyway; after a relatively brief honeymoon of painless and effective chewing, that's what teeth *did*. It's not just that no one flossed; flossing was unheard-of. All grown-ups had tooth trouble. Toothache. Mouth ulcers. Abscesses. Dentures. This was part of an as-yet-unopened package of adulthood to which we not only looked forward but aspired. During one discussion of various oral afflictions my mum exclaimed 'I've had gum boils!' as if announcing an achievement that was in danger of being unjustly overlooked. But always, towering over everything, was the ruthless precedent and purge established by my grandad, who'd solved the problem of teeth once and for all by having them all out when he was in the army in his early twenties, just to get it over with. Exterminate all the brutes! Teeth, according to this scorched-earth policy, were the equivalent of the appendix: an accidental leftover of evolution, serving no purpose that could not be better accomplished by false ones other than the giving of compound grief later on.

All dentists were assumed to be terrible. Whether they really were is hard to assess now. There were rumours that, since they were paid by the filling, these butchers would drill into perfectly healthy teeth to boost their already considerable income. Certainly, by the time I was eighteen most of my teeth had been filled but, given the amount of sugary food they'd chomped through and the daily tides of sweet drinks that had washed over them, it's amazing they'd held out this long.* By then I was starting not exactly to look after my teeth but I had become conscious of them as something other than a source of inevitable pain, defeat and resignation, partly because at about this time my mother was obliged to undergo a mouth-saving phase of extended dental work. It happened that I'd gone in for a check-up with the same dentist who was due to commence this last-ditch programme of works the very next day. 'I don't know who I feel most sorry for,' he said. 'Her or me.'

I had finished a version of this section when I was sent a proof of *Toy Fights*, Don Paterson's memoir which contains an account of his own love affair with sugar. Maybe one day we'll do an event together, a literary equivalent of competitive eating: England versus Scotland, at either the Cheltenham Literature or Edinburgh Book Festival, or a two-leg, home-and-away match, to see who really put away the most sugar, who will emerge, on aggregate, as the undisputed king of sweet.

My friend Gary Hunt was one of the three best footballers in our year, along with Andrew Hoshashinsky (I'm setting this down phonetically as I can't remember how his surname was spelt), Michael Cavanagh and Feisal Khalif. Over the course of a summer in Naunton Park rec, Gary became a kind of personal trainer, turning me into a decent footballer. They were football mad, Gary and his older brother, Glenn. It was at their house on Naunton Crescent that I first played Subbuteo, Penalty (with cloth-capped goalies, Stanley Matthews shirts, knee-length shorts, and boots that looked like rugby boots, the cards made an otherwise excellent game seem like a leftover from an aesthetically obsolete era of football), the managerial boardgame Soccerama (endorsed by Alan Ball), and 4-4-2 (a Subbuteo derivative). They also bought *Shoot* and *Goal* every week to fill in the wait for *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*. From newspapers they snipped photos of players and glued them into scrapbooks with handwritten captions like 'Rodney Marsh in action' or 'Bobby Moore in action'. Someone was always in action, though often the player was cut from the background so that they were suspended on the page, muddy-kneed in an action-free void.

At about this time – we were in the last year of junior school – a new development occurred in the world of card-swapping: the emergence on the market, or at least into our collective consciousness, of smaller and flimsier coloured photos – too flimsy even to count as cards, they were more like over-sized stamps – of fifteen footballers from each of the teams in the First Division to be pasted into a large *Wonderful World of Soccer Stars* album. It was more obvious with these football pictures than the sturdier Bond/Beatles series that certain cards, certain players, were harder to come by than others. Rarely sighted in the wilds of playground swapping, Bobby Charlton ('Need') and George Best ('NEED!') were, predictably, far more valuable than their Man United teammates Francis Burns ('Got') and John Aston (everyone, it seemed, had multiple John Astons). I'd like to gain access to records about the print runs of the various images, to find out the exact ratio of Bests or Laws to journeyman, now-forgotten players of less glamorous teams which have since slid down to the old Second or Third Divisions. Presumably these series were renewed and updated every year; for me it was a one-season wonder: 1968–69. The craze did not survive the transfer to secondary school, remained site-specific to Naunton Park, where Mike Summerbee (middle of the bottom row of the Man City page; below-averagely got, more than averagely needed) had also gone to school.

This immersion in all matters football led to an important and unforgettable event. A messenger came into class from Mr Millichap asking five of us to stand up. Andrew Hoshashinsky, Feisal, Michael, Gary and I had all been chosen to take part in trials for the school football team! It was my first ever public achievement. On the day of the trial match, as we stood around the stud-marked mud of the centre circle, Gary said he'd managed to sneak a look at the team sheets. Back then the formation was always 5-3-2, with the best players in the line of five forwards, working back to the two worst who were full backs.

'Where am I playing?' I asked him.

'Left back.'

I nodded stoically in the style of someone acknowledging that the team must always take precedence over the individual but I knew that this meant I had only just scraped into the trial.

'What about you?' I asked.

'Centre forward,' he said.

I never made the first team, even after a phase of trying to reinvent myself as a goalkeeper. Mr Millichap even granted me a special one-person trial, after which he decided to stick with his original choice of keeper. I was relieved in a way. In one of the footballing magazines an article stressed the importance of stretching. I took this to mean stretching not as a pre-yoga aid to enhanced flexibility but as a way of getting longer limbs and thereby covering more of the goal in the way that Reed Richards of *The Fantastic Four* was able to stretch. I didn't want to become any thinner than I already was so strenuously avoided stretching.

The passage from public triumph – being picked for the trials – to not making the team either as an outfield player or as goalie was swift and unsurprising. With our world defined by about fifty other boys and girls, everyone's place in the various hierarchies of school – classes and activities – was known and accepted by everyone, including oneself. Gary was not good at school work but he was a fantastic footballer. Other boys were clever in class but hopeless at sport. Most kids had something going for them. Simon Jones could play the piano (and went on to do so in a band when he was sixteen). No one fulfilled the public-school ideal of being good at sports and at classes, and therefore destined for great things. At the other end, though, were a few kids – usually marked out by the way one lens of their glasses was covered up to encourage a 'lazy eye' to work harder – who were useless at everything: class work, art, music and all kinds of sport.

Becoming interested in playing football also meant supporting a team. This was easily achieved since Auntie Hilda's boyfriend, CB, the self-made millionaire, was a life-long Chelsea fan. They went to every home game and soon the programmes – with Hilda's handwritten amendments to the team sheets – began arriving in the post along with rosettes (of rival teams), pennants, a bobble hat and duffle bag, a ticket signed by Charlie Cooke and Eddie McCreadie, and Peter Osgood's excellent autobiography, *Ossie the Wizard*.

My mum said that the Hunts' house was like a fairground, full of cheap and nasty things. We always bought cheap things ourselves but for some reason these weren't 'nasty'. She also liked saying things – different versions of the same things we commonly bought and used – were 'common'. What these things were is irrelevant; the important thing is the need for some kind of hierarchy – even if it exists only linguistically – *within* a shared tier of social formation.

There was nothing cheap, nasty or common about the place where Mark Harwood lived: a large decrepit house on Old Bath Road. His father was a carpenter who had the air of an eccentric inventor (wood chips in his hair). Mark called his dad Pops and his workshop was at the end of the overgrown back garden. For some reason Mark's mum was considered more refined than other mums, a bit of a snob even, but when a bunch of us kids, including Gary, called on Mark one Sunday the Harwood house looked such a wreck we said it was haunted. All we really meant was that it was old, different: uncommon.

At school we had to do projects from time to time and when Mark chose as his subject 'Show Business' – his mum was involved in the Leckhampton panto – I decided it would be mine too. For a few heady days Mark went around the school singing 'There's no business like show business', and although I too was going to devote myself to this exuberant topic I never joined in. It didn't matter because Mark changed course and decided his project would be on vintage cars instead, possibly because as well as living in an old wreck of a house his dad also drove a rubbish old car. I changed too and also decided to do vintage cars, even though my dad, of course, drove a Vauxhall Victor.

In the last few summers of junior school the open-air Sandford Lido vied with the rec at Naunton Park as the active centre of our lives. There were three diving boards, ample opportunities for bombing, lots of grass for stretching out towels and charging around. Early one evening we all went there for a special non-swimming event organised by the school, wearing proper clothes rather than the usual trunks. Mark was wearing long trousers and an implausible blazer and cravat, a cross between Jimmy Clitheroe and David Niven. During a lull in proceedings he taunted Gary by saying, 'We know something you don't know.'

'What about?' Gary asked, reasonably.

'About girls,' said Mark. I can't remember what it was we knew but I do know that this occurred *after* the school swimming day at Alstone Baths when Gary and I had been watching the girls lined up for their relay race in skinny one-piece swimsuits. 'That's a sight for sore eyes,' Gary had said, pointing the way ahead to an all-encompassing world of masculinity: values, interests, desires and linguistic resourcefulness. But Mark, in his uncommonly grown-up costume at the lido, was now laying claim to a future more sophisticated and seductive than any Gary could conceive. It seems significant that both of these exchanges took place at swimming pools, one indoors and municipal, the other outdoors: a rectangular oasis of Californian or Australian surf-life in the centre of the Cotswolds.

The first way Gary got left behind was by not going on the ten-day cruise on the SS *Uganda* during the last year of junior school, in April 1969. I'm not sure why since it wasn't prohibitively expensive. (Even though my dad was dead set against any extravagance it was immediately assumed that I'd be going.) Our parents walked us to school on D-Day (day of departure), lining the pavement to see us off, waving as the kid-crowded coach pulled away as though we were headed back in time to Gallipoli or forward to the Falklands (fittingly, since the *Uganda* was redeployed as a hospital ship when the task force set sail in 1982). Andrew Hoshashinsky didn't wave back to his parents. He said he was glad to be away from them, which we thought was funny and grown-up.

On the road we saw other coaches, became part of a loose convoy of kids from all over Britain heading to Southampton. Boarding our own ship at the harbour wasn't the only excitement; we also spotted the *QE2* as we were herded from coach to ship and then from deck to dormitories. (This was just a couple of weeks before my Auntie Hilda went on the maiden voyage with CB.) Bunk beds! I was on a bottom bunk. Within hours of getting settled in our dorm (called 'Speke', Muster Station K) some kind of incident occurred and I

went scurrying under a bunk, either in pursuit of or chased by a kid from another school, and a bit of metal – a protruding bed spring – cut my shoulder. ‘This guy’s hurt,’ said Steven Jacobs. He was English but somehow had access to American words (no one else said ‘guy’).

The injury was an unfortunate start to my cruise but it was, as they said in westerns and war films of the time, just a scratch. It was also the first in a series of light mishaps that befell us in the course of our time aboard ship. We played all sorts of games on deck, some sedate (quoits), others more boisterous. The best, which had no name, involved racing deckchairs – one person pushing, the other a kind of passive driver – with the recklessness of fairground dodgems. During one of these increasingly hectic races Mark Harwood’s deckchair collapsed on his fingers, crushing them beneath his own weight but, again, not too badly. That’s the main thing I remember from the cruise. Nothing seemed to have terrible consequences. Dave Sully had some money stolen, there was a whip-round and the loss made good. We felt we were being too strictly policed and planned to start a riot. How had the idea of a riot implanted itself in our young heads? Well, it worked – we were able to do whatever it was that we thought we weren’t able to do (which, in all probability, we had been allowed to do all the time). The highlight came when we went through the notoriously choppy straits of ... Ah, I can’t remember the name though hopefully it will drift back into my head at some point. Everyone got seasick. After a while we didn’t even puke into bags, just threw up all over the ship, but it didn’t really bother us. Rather than feeling ill it felt like a temporary relaxation of rules of behaviour, decorum and hygiene. We would have been disappointed if we hadn’t experienced seasickness, which passed as soon as we docked at wherever it was that we were headed.

The cruise was educational. This meant that there were classes on ship but the main purpose was to take us to places: Corunna in Spain and ... Casablanca, was it? The question mark is there because my little log book makes no mention of Morocco but we definitely visited a casbah. Was there a casbah in Corunna? Or Gibraltar (surely not) or Lisbon for that matter? Wherever it was, our teachers told us that before buying anything in this market we had to haggle, drive the price down to a mere fraction of whatever was initially asked. Warned not to buy flick knives, we were allowed to buy knives with bejewelled handles, and smelly, pig-coloured wallets with palm trees and – even though, wherever we were, we definitely weren’t in Egypt – pyramids embossed on them. We must have been strictly shepherded. No harm came to anyone and we made our way safely back to the ship, amazed at all the stuff we’d been able to buy.

There are a few black-and-white photos: a blurry grey sky with a blurrier seagull angling through it; Mark Harwood sitting on a capstan giving the thumbs-up, suggesting this had been taken either before the deckchair collapse or after he’d recovered from it. Apart from a tower at Corunna there are no pictures of the sites we visited – the mysteriously located casbah, for example – or of Gibraltar, where letters from our parents, posted before departure, were waiting for us. My mum and dad wrote that by the time I read this letter I would have seen all sorts of places they had only heard of. In turn we sent back postcards saying we were having a great time, which was true, though the truth was that the thing we had most enjoyed – as Hoshashinsky had predicted – was being away from our parents. The whole thing was a memorable experience even if, within weeks of getting back, we could remember very little about it. The jewels came off the handles of the miniature scimitars we had bought and the palm-tree wallets fell apart. The log book of my experiences aboard the SS *Uganda* survived but it’s a curious document in that nothing is written after Day 4. The final entry, for Sunday 20 April 1969, reads: ‘There was a service which you could go to if you wanted too but you did not have to. There were no lessons today as it was Sunday but there was a lecture after the...’

It’s as if at that moment a torpedo struck the doughty *Uganda* amidships, or a freak Mediterranean iceberg somehow holed the vessel below the waterline.

Oh, and as expected the name of the sea-sicky strait has indeed floated into my head after a delay of approximately twenty-four hours: not a strait at all but the Bay of Biscay.

Going or not going on the cruise had no lasting social impact. As soon as we were back life resumed its previous patterns and habits. And Gary had not been left behind; or at least he and Mark Harwood, who had been on the cruise, got left behind together.

Although all three parts of Naunton Park – infants, juniors and seniors – shared the same site the senior school had its own playground and was separated internally from the juniors by retractable or concertinaed floor-to-ceiling doors. We could see into this world of the older boys, some of whom we knew, either because they were brothers or because they lived in the neighbouring streets. One day I saw Brian Andrews fighting, seeming to strangle another boy. When I bumped into him on the way home I asked if he had

strangled this other kid. He said yes but didn't know if the kid had died or not. I knew he was saying this to sound tough but it was further evidence that it was a scary place, the seniors: scary, but in other respects a direct and familiar continuation of life at the juniors. And most of us would be going there after the 11-plus.

The 11-plus was the central event in the life of any state-school child in the 1960s. There are accounts of kids being conscious of its importance, the nervous tension of exam days, the anxious hopes of parents. At Naunton Park, although there were rehearsals and practises – mocks, as they would be called at O-level – the tests were not announced in any special way; there was nothing to make us aware that on these particular days our futures – our lives – would be decided. We just turned up at school as usual and took the tests. In addition to the tests we had to write a story of some kind, and since I was more interested in football than anything else I wrote something that began with a newspaper vendor calling out 'Read all about it!', directing passers-by to the headline of the paper: 'YOUNG CHELSEA FORWARD KIDNAPPED'. (No newspaper sellers in Cheltenham shouted 'Read all about it!' so I must have got this from TV.)

Afterwards I told Gary I'd written about a Chelsea player being kidnapped. He said he kept football out of things like that so we – Gary, me, everyone else – *were* conscious that there was something unusually important about what we were doing at our desks over the course of those several days. I felt I'd been stupid writing about a footballer, especially since Gary was even more football-obsessed than I, and so much of my football enthusiasm had come from him.

Weeks earlier my parents had received a letter asking us to list the secondary schools I might attend, in order of preference, and depending on the results of the 11-plus: Cheltenham Grammar School, the Technical High (Tech) School, or Naunton Park Seniors. My parents said we should put the grammar school first even though I didn't want to go there, and I went along with this since there was no chance of my passing anyway.

So, we all sat the 11-plus without exactly knowing it, I wished I hadn't written this story about the Chelsea forward getting kidnapped, junior school came to an end, and we enjoyed the long holiday as we always did, either going to Bournemouth for a few days of rain or just staying at home for the whole summer except for a week at my grandparents' damp house in Shropshire. And then, as my mum told the story over and over to our relatives and anyone else who would listen, 'a buff-coloured envelope' arrived in the post. Just that phrase was enough for everyone hearing her to break the code, to know what was coming. They all understood. 'Buff-coloured envelope' meant I had passed the 11-plus, was going to grammar school.

This was the most momentous event of my life, not simply up to that point but for its duration. Everything else that has happened couldn't have happened were it not for that. I understand that the purpose of the 11-plus was not to send a few clever kids – kids, more exactly, who'd passed the 11-plus – to grammar school. That was a side-effect or corollary of the larger aim and intention: to ensure a steady flow of workers who would *not* go to grammar school, who would fail the 11-plus, go to secondary moderns and on to apprenticeships, to jobs in trades and factories. The price of my passing the 11-plus and going to grammar school was paid by so many of the friends I'd had at Naunton Park, who lived within a ten-minute walk of our house. I *know* this but still it's impossible to disassociate my sense of myself from a feeling of absolute gratitude to this system of selection. It's terrible that the course of your life, the range of options available to you, should be decided at the age of eleven. Of course comprehensive schools are better, more just, as long as the choice is simply between grammar /secondary and comprehensive. But private schools mean the equation is skewed and comprehensives are no longer comprehensive.

Marvin Hagler said that if you cut open his bald head you'd find a big boxing glove in there because that's all he was: a boxer. Same with me. *On* my head, invisibly, is the black cap with silver badge of Cheltenham Grammar School. I am a pure product of grammar school, a grammar-school boy through and through, to the core of my being.

Gary remained at Naunton Park Secondary Modern, following in the footsteps of his brother, Glenn, but was not left behind by Mark, who also failed the 11-plus. (I'm sure my mum felt that the snobby Mrs Harwood had been put in her place.) Michael Cavanagh passed, as did Feisal (whose brother Adam was already at the grammar). Andrew Hoshashinsky went to the tech. No friendships survived this dispersal by perceived ability and geography.

Left to grow into new sizes of the familiar Naunton Park Seniors blazer, Gary, Mark and others could continue knotting their old navy-and-gold ties. That seemed reassuring when I heard that, at the grammar school, new boys routinely had their heads pushed into the toilets while the flush was pulled. Stories like

these – generic, apocryphal – were quickly debunked by other sources and so, in the summer before my first term, Mum and I fearlessly shopped for the new uniform – black blazer, black and silver tie, cap with badge, long trousers – and the required reversible black-and-white rugby jersey.

The 11-plus: the big divider, the forger of destinies.

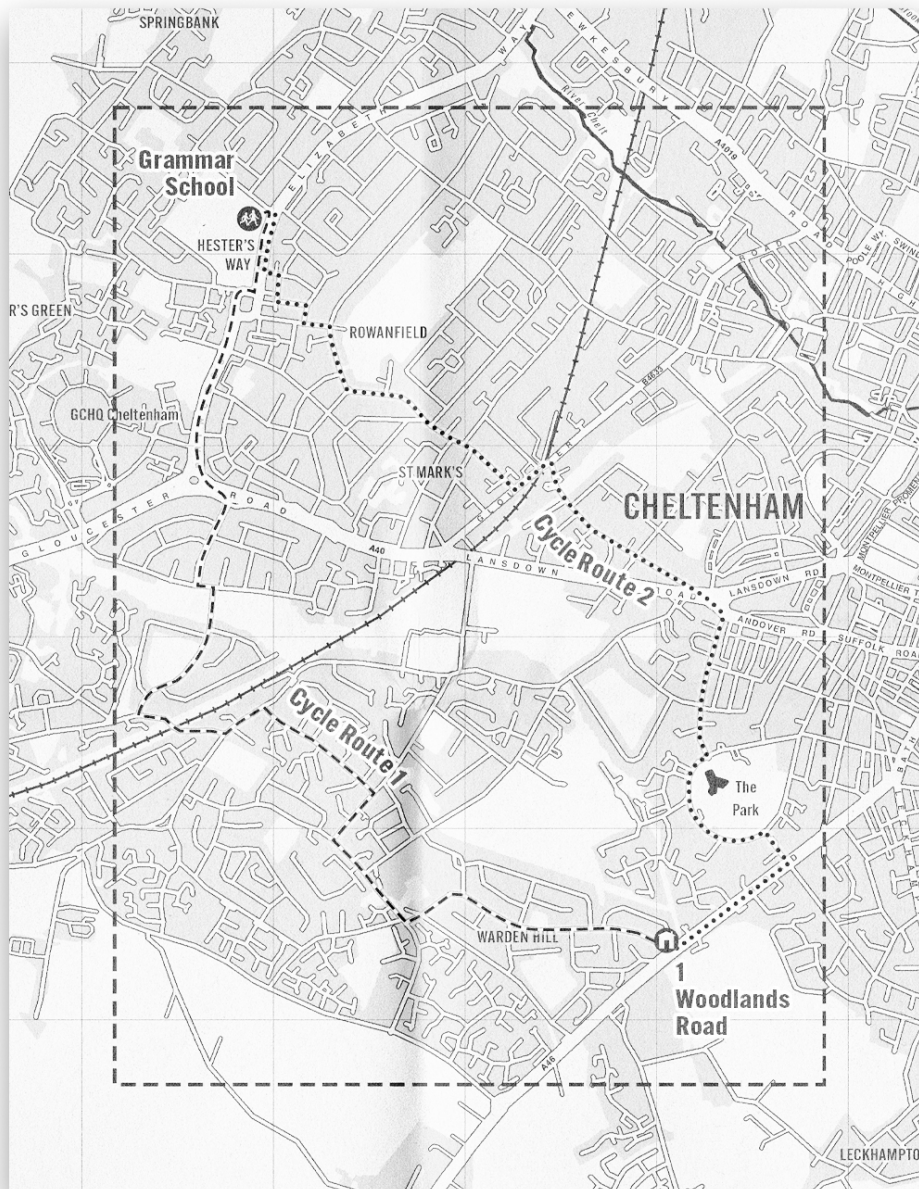


My year: Naulton Park Juniors (I'm in there somewhere)

2

‘How differently one perceives the business and work of one’s life if one is the first in the family to have done it, or if one’s father and grandfather have done the same! There is much more inner conflict, much more immediate pride involved.’

Friedrich Nietzsche, unpublished fragment



Cheltenham Grammar School

The grammar school was in Hesters Way, a poor neighbourhood, though not as poor and rough as Whaddon, home of both our local football team, the Robins, and of a notoriously bad family. (What this family did, what made them bad, was never specified; *being* bad defined them totally.) For the first term, decked out in our new uniforms, all the former Naunton Park kids going to grammar school or the tech travelled by bus through the town centre. The tech kids got off, appropriately, at the halfway point, while we stayed on till the next-to-last stop, before Coronation Square, a new shopping development equidistant between the borders of the grammar's large playing fields and Monkscroft (another sec mod). Spreading out from Coronation Square were council blocks, three or four storeys high, also newish, already looking rain-aged. From time to time we would hear of tensions and trouble with Monkscroft, but except for a few isolated skirmishes the pupils of both schools rarely bothered – scarcely came into contact – with each other.

I stopped taking the bus after the first term. From then on, like everyone else, I cycled to school on my racer. The thrall that racing bikes exerted in the late 1960s and early '70s! Back then bikes *were* racers. If you didn't have a racer you didn't have a bike but since no one who had a bike *didn't* have a racer this was not an issue. There was no room in the school bike sheds or our imaginations for three-speed sit-up-and-begs; with wicker baskets and an attendant whiff of the Edwardian vicarage, these were so firmly part of the past that they had vanished from view. We loved everything about racers. Not just the dropped handlebars, but the tape around the drops, the moulded cowling over the brake levers, the brakes themselves (side- or centre-pull), the high-pressure tyres, quick-release wheels, Shimano gears ...

After extensive research and multiple visits to Williams Cycles it was agreed that, for my first Christmas at grammar school, I'd be getting a Dawes Red Feather, blue.

With his usual unflagging determination, my dad negotiated the inclusion of a full range of accessories in the purchase price. A contradiction was at work here. In the world of racing bikes lightness was all. A racer was defined by its stripped-down-ness, so the fewer add-ons you had the closer you got to the ideal of racerness (mudguards were exempt from these strictures, not an extra but accepted as an integral part of the bike's functionality); but the more stuff you got thrown in for free the better the deal so my bike came weighed down with the fruits of my dad's implacable haggling: aluminium pump, Eveready lights and fittings, special lightweight racing bell, water bottle and holder, a rack for carrying my satchel, maybe even an odometer (there definitely *was* an odometer but that was so obviously an extra it was not negotiated into the purchase price). The lock was a little four-number combination with a lightweight chain barely long enough to wrap around the front wheel and the bike rack or the rear wheel and the frame. You could have cut through it with a pair of tough kitchen scissors and the combination could have been cracked by anyone who had seen a few episodes of *Alias Smith and Jones*. As such it was a robust symbol of how little crime there was, either at school or in the town at large.

On the night before Christmas, even though I no longer believed in Father Christmas, I couldn't sleep. Correctly assuming that the restlessness was due to the excitement engendered by my long-looked-forward-to ownership of a Red Feather, my dad invited me into the parental bedroom to reassure me that it was there, waiting to be handed over the following morning. Which it was. And so, having lugged it upstairs on Christmas Eve, he lugged it down again on Christmas Day. Straight after breakfast, I set off on my maiden voyage. I powered up Leckhampton Road to Yo and Daryl's, across from the allotments, getting a signed declaration from Yo as proof that I had come all this way, so easily, so quickly, in the nothing-y Christmas weather. After the holidays, in January, I cycled to school every day. It really was wonderful, even if the

wonder proved short-lived. The truth was that I had outgrown the blue Red Feather psychologically before I even got it and began to outgrow it physically soon after. I'd wanted something better, more advanced, lighter, with centre-pull rather than side-pull brakes, ten gears not five – a Claud Butler ideally – and within a year we had raised the saddle and handlebars as far as they could safely go. Even the brief honeymoon of compatibility was marred by a surprising susceptibility to punctures. These punctures had to be located (inner tube inflated in a bucket of water, emitting tell-tale bubbles) and patched. A boring job if ever there was one: awkward but do-able, obviously, and all the more onerous for that reason, especially since the inadequately mended puncture invariably had itself to be re-mended. That was a recurring lesson of growing up that my dad was always keen for me to learn: any increase in pleasure came with a corresponding or disproportionate escalation of responsibility or obligation that had the potential to turn the object of pleasure into a source of drudgery.

I can see that blue Red Feather now as it stood alert and waiting in the dim light of my parents' bedroom in the early hours of Christmas morning. The strange thing, as I picture it in my mind, is that the bike seemed to know that its days were numbered. It was conceived as an intermediate model, and a sense of transient usefulness was built into its DNA, its design and manufacture. We are reminded, always, that a dog is not just for Christmas, but that bike knew, in its metallic bones, that its first owner, however infatuated, would soon tire of it. And so it turned out. After about eighteen months I sold it to a kid in the year below me at school and bought Nick Thomas's elder brother's racer. I don't even recall what make it was. The Red Feather had been a passport; its replacement was just a bike. In the same way, I can't remember the make of car that replaced my dad's Victor, only that it was second-hand, greenish, and was itself traded in, some years down the line, for a red automatic.

In a place famed for its Jane Austen terraces, the grammar school was, by some distance, the most forbidding modernist building in town. Critics said that it looked like a prison. The open-air brutalist walkways on the first floor, overlooking the central courtyard, had similarities with the wing, but whereas prisons are constructed around the idea of minimal trust and maximum scrutiny another component of the school's design was that our belongings, instead of being stored in desks, in a classroom, were kept in unlocked lockers, recessed into the walls along the tile-floor corridors. The corridors and stairs were always busy between classes as everyone rushed from room to room. If two classrooms at the top of the stairs were changing at the same time – two class-loads of boys trying to shove their way out as two more were shoving their way in – a dangerous crush developed. This was great fun in the same way that, on the bus to swimming classes at Alstone Baths, we continued the junior-school habit of piling into the top corner, trying to get the double-decker to topple over. Disaster held no terror, possessed a kind of hilarious attraction. In 1971 there'd been a fatal crush at the Rangers stadium and whenever the scrum at the top of the stairs became extreme we'd chant 'Ibrox, Ibrox!', celebrating the imminent possibility of death and injury (our own), willing it on.

The unlocked lockers ran in rows of two, like bunk beds, one up, one down, along both the external walkways and the enclosed corridors framing the assembly hall. It says something about what a safe, comfortable era and school it was that there was never any theft from them. So, trust was built into the architecture of the school; fears of getting one's head shoved like a toilet brush down a grammar-school bog proved unfounded, but there were other brushes with trouble. In the first week, a brief exchange with another new kid concluded with the following warning from me: '... unless you want your head duffed in'. No one uses that verb any more, but back then 'duffed' was our preferred term of aggressive intent and it existed only in the realm of language, not of action; the fact that I had never been in a fight did not stop these words coming to my lips as naturally as an expression of courtesy. That's all it was: a courtesy call(-out). And when I say the conversation concluded with this expression what I mean is that it brought to an end my involvement in it. The other boy replied 'Oh good, I've been looking for a fight', and I backed down, instantly. There was no disgrace in this because I might just as well have said 'Pleased to meet you.' Still, I should have known that I had picked the wrong kid to talk tough to since his name was Myles Lawless and the response from teachers, whenever he gave his name at registration at the beginning of term, had been strikingly consistent: 'I hope you're nothing like your brother.' His brother, Liam, three years older, had a long scar down his face and was, we quickly learned, one of only three or four bad boys in the school. As with the bad family of Whaddon residents, I didn't know exactly what he was involved in or where the scar came from but warning Myles not to follow in his brother's footsteps seems in retrospect almost a guarantee that he would try to do so. If there was one boy in our year to avoid it was Myles, and

he became my friend. Early on he led an expedition up Leckhampton Hill where bows and arrows would be used to shoot ... *something*. There was even talk in class of fire arrows, of setting buildings – or, since there were none up there, perhaps the sturdy old hill itself – ablaze. I was not part of this mission, was conscious both of missing out and relieved not to be involved because, as always with Myles, there was a sense of being urged beyond the behavioural and geographical borders of routine experience. Leckhampton Hill wasn't a place one went to regularly, even at weekends. It wasn't that we weren't allowed to go there, we just didn't. Getting there was too much ... trouble.

Myles was associated with everything on the fringes of trouble, risk and the unsavoury, or just beyond what we knew about at any given stage of our development. He pioneered the strange craze, for example, of induced fainting. If someone took twenty deep breaths, held their breath and then were held very tightly from behind, they passed out. The 'strange' part of it was that the desired role was to be a fainter not the one who induced the faint. There was always a line of volunteers eager to be rendered unconscious, whereas those who knew how to make it happen – Myles and a couple of his helpers – were always in short supply. And it turns out, these assistant shamans did not know how to make it happen either. Despite numerous attempts no one actually fainted.

And then there was the ouija board, secretly consulted in one of the storage rooms. The board was not a board but a broken desk with the letters of the alphabet handwritten on pieces of paper and arranged in a circle around an upturned glass. We pressed our fingers on the inverted glass which, as was not the case with the fainting craze, responded unfailingly whenever Myles intoned the words 'Is there anybody there?' Somebody was there, always; the next thing was to ask this disembodied somebody, 'Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ?' If they didn't you hung up, cut the connection right there; if they did then you moved on to the next question: 'Who are you?' Well, whoever they were they were quick to spell out their names, amid the frightened accusations – 'Someone's pushing it!' – and the chorus of denial: 'It's not me.' Beyond that I can't remember what we asked but I do remember that communing with the spirit world like this achieved the almost supernatural feat of being both very scary and deadly dull. And so, to everyone's relief, the ouija craze petered out soon after it began in a swirl of fear and disappointment, leaving behind only a trace of rapidly evaporated fascination: the lived equivalent of the section of Hesters Way Library devoted to the novels of Dennis Wheatley.

Back in the non-paranormal world, and jumping ahead a few years, Myles, after rugby, would run naked into the showers when he was, in the argot of the day, on the bone. He had a very thin prick but it was hard – perfectly adapted, it seemed, to being stuck in somewhere. Part of the fun in biology class was to try to insert that phrase 'on the bone' – enunciated not as three simple words but as an enthusiastically abbreviated trochaic chant – into exchanges with Mr Dempsey without his being aware of it, and Myles pushed this further into the classroom discourse than anyone else dared. Dempsey's defining trait was the lack of half a little finger, and as he explained that the body's muscles were attached to the skeleton by tendons Myles seized the opportunity to raise the five fingers of his fully formed hand and seek anatomical clarification. 'So, sir, the muscles are not *on the bone*?' Once this had been answered in the affirmative Myles showed that he had grasped the key role played by tendons, this time adding greater emphasis. 'So it's not the muscles, sir, it's the tendons that are *ON THE BONE*?' In other classes, he would occasionally get out this skinny boner of his and briefly masturbate, announcing 'I smell spunk', but it was really just the vaguely urinous smell of underpants. This prompts one to wonder, in retrospect, if he might have been gay, and while it was indeed Myles who advised us how to tell if you were a poof – 'Just stick your finger up your arse' – this bit of self-testing was intended to weed out and expose. He was actually the most openly heterosexual boy in the class in that he led the way not only in the linguistics of eros but in actual sexual adventures.

During the spring of my first year at grammar school, when the Red Feather and I were still an item, we (me, bike, parents) moved to a new and bigger house, semi-detached, on the corner of Woodlands Road and Shurdington Road. There'd been a last-minute hitch as my dad discovered, after paying the deposit, that the house was two hundred yards outside the border of Cheltenham and therefore beyond the catchment area of the grammar school. Emphasising that he wanted 'to do the right thing', he wrote to the Chief Education Officer to explain this unfortunate situation, hoping that I might be able to continue at the school where I had 'settled down well'. And I was allowed to.

The new house was big: front room, living room, three bedrooms, a conservatory, an upstairs bathroom and, in an annex beyond the narrow kitchen, an indoor toilet. (I say it was indoors but old habits and fears die hard; because it was unheated, my dad lagged the pipes, drained the cistern and turned off the water

during the winter. So, for eight months of the year, we reverted to having just the one toilet upstairs.) The space available for standing in the kitchen was less than that taken up by contemporary kitchen islands; in the spare bedroom there was space only for a single bed and a big chest of drawers. Apart from the bathroom, also small, everything else was on a significantly larger scale. My parents' bedroom and the front room both had bay windows, deemed an important and therefore much-cited architectural expression of our enhanced status. But the customs of Fairfield Walk decreed that the front room remain unused – the cocktail cabinet felt instantly at home in there – while the expanded size of the living room meant it could accommodate more stuff and therefore seemed every bit as cramped as its predecessor. One alcove proved a perfect fit for a big, dark-wood, five-shelved china cabinet with a locked glass door. In here, partly obscured by the telly, my mum hid and displayed our ancestral valuables: silver toast racks, Victorian china tea sets, silver sugar-basin set, two 1918 mugs, silver egg cups, cut-glass jugs. This can't have been new but I am absolutely unable to picture it at Fairfield Walk. Where had it been? How had I not noticed it? The fact that I *hadn't* means that it somehow manifested itself, like a fragile vernacular equivalent of the monolith in 2001, at this turning point in my parents' lives, in a new home which – this was assumed the instant they bought it – would also be their last.

The biggest attraction of this new property was the large garden. There were multiple flower beds, an extensive vegetable patch and, just beyond the bottom of the garden, a brook, not babbling but bubbling from time to time with smelly agricultural run-off or industrial froth.

Strictly speaking the brook was on our neighbours' land. They were Jehovah's Witnesses, regarded by my father with roughly the suspicion residents of Antelope, Oregon, would later come to view the cult of Rajneesh. These suspicions were calmed, without ever being entirely dispelled, when the Witnesses and their kids turned out to be the ideal neighbours. Since the brook was out of sight of the rest of their garden I was granted unlimited access to this bit of proximate wilderness. I built a makeshift tree-house out of wedged planks and hung a swing-rope from the willow that wept over the pongy brook. That was a bonus attraction, but the best thing of all was firmly within our own borders: the big if lumpy lawn.

The very last thing to be transferred from Fairfield Walk to Woodlands Road was the old roller, previously of notional value, destined now to earn its keep and prove its rusty mettle. Dad and I rolled it, flattening the pavement as we went, past the Shurdington Arms and the chip shop – where, forty years later, I bought him a bag of chips, soggy and a bit cold by the time I got them home, on the day my mum died, in the bedroom at Woodlands Road – along Shurdington Road to its new berth where it was used, definitely and ineffectively, for flattening the lawn in the hope that it could serve as an undersized tennis court.

After the move, rain* or shine, I cycled to school, taking one of two routes, either:

1. bombing down through Warden Hill, on to Benhall, and through the underpass near GCHQ or,
2. the flatter route – which I always took home – through Tivoli, past the train station and the streets whose names (Tennyson, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Byron) poetically announced not the proximity of the grammar school but a concentrated enclave of council estates.

On route 2 one morning I saw two girls, on Shurdington Road, almost at the junction of Moorend Park Road, waiting for the bus which would take them from home to – their dark blue uniforms announced – the convent school. It was axiomatic, at our school, that all the girls at the convent were 'sex-starved', so the next time I saw them I stopped and we sort of talked. Talking to girls meant one thing back then: chatting them up, a skill so mysterious no one had any idea how or where one might set about acquiring it. Being at a single-sex school, without sisters whose friends I may have met, meant I had no casual contact with girls, no experience of *getting used to them*; I lacked grammar and vocabulary, every component that made communication possible. Still, whenever I saw these two sisters, I'd pull over and try to think of something to say. In the cumulative awkwardness of one of these non-chats, the older of the two, the one I liked, with long dark hair, mentioned that she knew another boy from the grammar school, Pierre Laprade, who, along with Myles, was one of the bad boys in our year. In response to this unwelcome news, the only thing I could think to say was 'I like competition.' After delivering this line I pedalled off, pleased to have swaggered spontaneously into the linguistic realm of chat-up. It took less than twenty-four hours for news of this

declaration to be conveyed to Laprade and his friend, the slightly scary Martin who did weightlifting. (If a fight was simmering between Martin and an opponent, onlookers would encourage Martin to 'Pick him up.' Obviously there were worse things that could happen. Better to get lifted off your feet than have your head duffed in, but the knowledge that he was capable of doing this filled everyone with dread because it was obvious that you could, at any moment, be flung to the floor.) For the next several days, every time I saw Laprade and Martin at school one of them would say 'He likes competition.' Except I didn't. Another linguistic shortcoming: I didn't know the word 'mortifying'. But I didn't need to know the word to experience everything that it meant. From then on I sulked past the smirking Convent girls without a word.

My best friend at school was Nick Thomas and for a while we formed a loose trio with Myles. (Earlier I worried about this book sounding like the autobiography of a minor British painter; now it sounds like the memoir of a forgotten jazz man.) At some point we got to know a couple of girls who lived near me. One was called Yvonne, whose dad, like mine, worked at Spirax. She wore a bomber jacket and was altogether less alluring than Corinne, who had a feather cut and looked as close to Rod Stewart as a thirteen-year-old girl is ever likely to. Unusually, our group expanded to include a friend of Myles's – another sign of his outlaw tendencies – who was not at the grammar school. His name was Steve and he managed to feel Corinne's tits. While this was an achievement to be admired it came as a blow since I'd hoped I might do something like that, especially since I'd met her before him. Then, a few days later, Myles dropped another bombshell: Corinne had become a scrubber by allowing Steve to stick his fingers in her cunt. (That doesn't sound right. I'm not entirely convinced that was the word he or we used. So what word *did* we use? 'Pussy' was an American import that no one, at least no one at my school, had even heard at that point. So it can only have been cunt.) This seems like a parable dreamed up by feminists but the verdict and the change in Corinne's status really was as sudden as that. One day we were all hoping to have some kind of minimal sexual contact with Corinne ('a bit of tit', in Myles's contemptuously optimistic phrase), the next she was a scrubber.

But *where* had this regrettable fall occurred? Faced with the teenager's perpetual lament that we had nowhere to go, we tended to hang out – another phrase that had no place in our lexicon at that point – at the local laundrette which, since it was rarely frequented by anyone doing laundry, became a de facto youth club. Surrounded by bleary-eyed washing machines and vacant dryers we sat on wooden benches, chatting, and, because there was nothing else to do, vandalising the clock. It was of unsuitable design in that the hands were not encased by any kind of glass or protective cage, so we twisted the hour and minute hands round each other. All credit to that clock: it limped gamely on, going about its business in a strangled dance – to the damaged music of time, I suppose – but it must have sensed in a disoriented way that its best days were numbered (between 3 and 4 to be precise). I think we all felt pretty stupid afterwards – no one thought the clock *looked* better in this maimed and pointless condition – but I felt so badly about what we'd done that I confessed to my dad, asking him to promise not to tell Yvonne's dad. But he did tell him, of course, and then Yvonne's dad told her (off) and she told me and soon we no longer went to the timeless laundrette, and what with Corinne having become a scrubber and me a snitch this little cluster of friendship and romance was brought to a sudden and acrimonious end.

Rugby not football was the official sport at school but everyone preferred football, especially after the high-altitude telly experience of the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. We played football before school (if we got there early enough), during mid-morning break, at lunch and sometimes after school. When the weather was good we played on the playing fields (though not on the protected rugby pitches), but for most of the year we were in the playground which was crowded with multiple games so that at any time you could get smacked in the face by a ball from a simultaneous and rival game. Briefly painful though this was it was insignificant compared with tripping over and gashing our knees, trousers and hands. The falls routinely taken would now result not just in bloody, grit-filled knees but fractured patellas; minor sprains would require wrist surgery followed by months of gruelling physical therapy. Training shoes had recently come on the market – my first pair were Golas – but if someone forgot their trainers they played in their normal hard shoes, taking bites out of the shins and ankles of anyone tackled. None of this bothered us. The only thing that bothered us was not being able to play as much football as we wanted to. No one broke a leg, arm or ankle. The only really bad accident was when Nick Thomas knocked his two front teeth out after running into one of the metal posts securing the fence at the edge of the playground. He was off school for a

week after that.

Even more amazing than the way that we never got seriously hurt is the way that we never drank any liquids. We were immune to thirst, could go all day without pissing. You'd have thought that we were natives of some scorched part of the Sahara, refreshing ourselves only rarely with Coke from the school tuck shop. We never drank and we never washed. Sweaty from football we'd rush back after the break or lunch and dry out in class. Having said that, I don't remember the discomfort of sitting at a desk in sweat-drenched clothes; maybe we didn't sweat at all because we were so thoroughly dehydrated.

We didn't drink and *I* didn't eat either. The dinners at junior school had been inedibly horrible. This proved good preparation for grammar school, where they were every bit as horrible. During one meal I tried to swallow a piece of meat – more like two blobs of meat connected, like weights on a bar, by a length of gristle. One lump was halfway down my throat, the other was still in my mouth. Faced with a choice I had no time to make – chew and swallow the latter or get the former back up into my mouth – the outcome was to gag. That was especially horrible, but all the food was horrible, at junior school, at grammar school, and at home. My tacit hunger strike started early because I couldn't drink the free milk that was considered a vital component of a child's health and it continued, at home and at school, for years.

It's not that I had high standards. I had no standards at all, but that didn't make the food any less horrible. On the JTC camp in Wales, the Supreme Commander, Dave Sully's dad, asked what I'd thought of the previous night's dinner and I said, though I didn't mean it, that I hadn't really liked it. What I really meant was that it was horrible. 'Well, you're hard to please,' he replied. It was a terrible rebuke. Being 'hard to please' was anathema to the culture of gratitude that pervaded the 1960s. We were grateful for the end of rationing, grateful not to be starving like Biafrans with their hugely distended bellies and fly-encrusted eyes. And it wasn't true what Dave Sully's dad said. I was actually very easy to please, could have lived quite happily on Huntley & Palmers Breakfast Biscuits in the day and Vesta beef curry in the evening.* I did like some things, it's just that I didn't like *most* things. My parents alternated between trying to make me eat and resigning themselves to the conclusion that 'If he was hungry he'd eat': another instance of the way that everyday life was measured against a baseline of survival and subsistence.

The opposite of *Oliver Twist*, I was always wanting either less or, ideally, none at all. How *did* I survive given that I ate and drank nothing before cycling home where I'd have a glass of squash before my mum served some slop for tea that was marginally less horrible than the slop we'd been served for dinner (lunch)? Those school meals! Toad-in-the-hole: sausages – made entirely of fat – served in batter. Grey lamb – nothing but fat and gristle – with mashed potatoes that were both watery and lumpy. Pale, wilted chips. Evaporated carrots, swamp-boiled cabbage. Stink-fish on Fridays. Worst of all was the veiny liver, a dense concentrate of horror in appearance, texture, colour and smell. I haven't included 'taste' in this list of charges because there was none. I don't mean it was lacking in taste; I bet it wasn't, am sure it packed a punch, but I never got that far, never actually tasted it. The smell of all the food was disgusting and this smell, congealed and lingering, contaminated the school, from the time it was being prepared in the morning to the afternoons when the remains of one day's slop were being disposed of and the kitchens cleaned prior to the preparation of the next day's slop. The smell of food typically makes one hungry but this miasma of frying fat, of vegetables boiled to extinction, made me dread the prospect of eating. I'd really like to see that slop now, have it transported from the past and properly examined by someone from the Jamie Oliver Institute of Nutrition. It would fall below every EU-established standard of what is fit for human and possibly even animal consumption.

Since I was incapable of eating school dinners it made sense to pursue alternatives. For a while I brought in a blue flask filled with Heinz vegetable soup. And a bread roll. Those of us who'd opted for this ate in a kind of cupboard-room, a subdued little table of dietary outcasts. After a month this was abandoned in favour of another solution, arranged with my parents' consent, of using money that would have been spent on school dinners and spending it instead on drippers at the cake shop on Coronation Square. The school didn't like us going up there – possible trouble with yobs from Monkscroft, occasional allegations of shoplifting from the newsagent – but it was not forbidden. The overwhelming thing in its favour – and the decisive factor in my negotiating this settlement with my parents – was that although nutritionally the dripper, our local iteration of a lardy cake, might have left something to be desired, it represented a clear advance over the absolute lack of benefit derived from eating nothing at all of the laid-on scoff at school. So that was the solution to my dietary needs: a dripper.

The nutritional low-point came when my mum went into hospital for a hysterectomy. My dad couldn't

really cook and so, having feasted on a dripper for lunch, in the evening, after visiting Mum in hospital, I sat down to beans on toast or a tin of orange Heinz spaghetti (also on toast) with him at home.

To my surprise I quite enjoyed rugby, up to a point. That point was reached with puberty, in the third form, when half the boys were on the way to being men, and it became too frightening to try to tackle the burly likes of Hugh Perkins as he came buffaloeing down the mud-frosted pitch. Worse than the game itself – and not unrelated to the fear of the boys who were men – was having to shower afterwards with one's tiny or non-existent wisp of pubic hair. Every detail of the experience merged in a general miasma of horror: the clumps of dried mud with holes from the studs of our boots underfoot, the steam of the shower and the wintry air outside, the suspiciously watchful eye of the groundsman as Myles darted past with his skinny boner, the distinctive smell of the changing rooms that brought shower and toilet into such close proximity that by association one was cleaning oneself in very hot piss.

Because there was no official school football team some of the boys in my year formed a team to play in the Sunday league. It was called Cheltenham Whites – which came first, the name or the all-white, Leeds United-style strip? – the star player was black (Feisal from Naunton Park), and the rest of the squad was made up of the dozen or so kids who were picked first in our casual games at school. The same players always got picked last – and were forced to go in goal – but they accepted this with the good grace of those condemned by the inflexible rules of merit to the lowest tiers of a caste system. I'd typically get chosen at around about five or six (tenth or twelfth in the total two-sided scale) and so I just made the cut for this new venture. I was entirely one-footed and played on the left wing, though by reference to the same system of selection established at junior school was sometimes relegated to left-sided defence, which always seemed a tactical mistake since I was, to put it mildly, a reluctant tackler. Some days I played well but as soon as there was any pressure, in other words during any official match, I wilted, collapsed, sulked, got substituted. The occasion always got to me, irrespective of the occasion. On one of these occasions, during a tournament in Churchdown, with my dad watching from the sideline, I skyed an absolute sitter, in front of an open goal, from the edge of the six-yard box, a howler that led to our crashing out of the competition. I didn't like playing against aggressive strangers, and in league games the opposition was made up entirely of strangers and the play, naturally, was more aggressive. Self-conscious about my skinny legs, I never wore shin pads and so, in any confrontational situation, I was tentative, easily intimidated and – as was not the case in the playground – frequently hurt. Word had it that if you went in hard this would protect you from being injured but there was always the danger that the opposition player, driven by the same ferocious logic, might go in even harder, so I went in, if at all, even softer. I was similarly reluctant to head the leather match ball which, when wet, felt like a damp cannonball exploding in your brain. I preferred playing with the orange or white plastic Wembley Trophy balls when we were just kicking around at school or in non-official games.

During these friendly, unofficial games I played in Chelsea colours: blue shirt with badge sewn on by my mum, blue shorts (with white stripe down the sides, also sewn on by Mum) and white socks. Always thin, I felt even thinner in the team's official all-white strip. My boots were Puma 333s but, consistent with an overall inability to step up on match days, I was always happier in my Gola trainers (white with red stripes). I loved playing football and much of the time didn't enjoy it at all; was quite good at it and also quite bad at it.

A BBC documentary about Margaret Thatcher features footage of an interview in which she reminisces about her humble beginnings. Her dad was an alderman, her mum a seamstress.

Until my mum began working at the school canteen her days were almost devoid of incident – unless I counted as an incident. After that there was a lot to report and these reports conformed closely to certain conventions. Following some scene-setting preamble the heart of the story was always introduced with the word 'Course', and ended with a rhetorical flourish: 'didn't she?' or 'don't you?' People in these stories occasionally 'said' things but when it came to important plotlines they never spoke, only ever 'piped up'. Combine this with her habit of an adjective being applied as consistently as a rank or title ('little Audrey Stanley' or 'Ruby the cook') and you had a formula as fixed as a sonnet, one that could cover any narrative eventuality, because the possibilities had been so severely restricted by the devices available. One day there was a heated discussion among the staff about how much should be spent on a present for a cook who was leaving. That was the set-up. Thereafter the climax could unfold within the tight gap left for improvisation

and originality: 'Course, little Audrey Stanley pipes up, ["..."], didn't she?' I can't remember what it was that little Audrey Stanley piped up on this or any other occasion, which is both strange because – and explained by the way that – it wasn't just the form, the content, too, was endlessly recycled.

In 1983, after she reached the age at which council employees were obliged to retire, my mum left the school canteen and became a cleaner at a hall of residence for student doctors. When she'd worked at the canteen she sometimes said that she would like to have been a seamstress; during the years when she worked as a cleaner she came back to this again and again. With the same insistence that she'd regaled us with stories of little Audrey Stanley, she was always piping up to say how she would have loved to have been a seamstress. It's true, she was a wonderful sewer of things, always repairing clothes for my dad and me, and, when I was at Naunton Park, making outfits for my Action Man: the ostensibly civilian clothes that allowed him to operate undercover. The living room table was often covered in patterns and fabrics for the jackets or shirts she was making. Between these more ambitious undertakings she was constantly darning socks, turning the collars of shirts and hemming trousers. Sometimes she'd let me take the wheel of the sewing machine, but instead of maintaining the slow steady trundle of sound that she kept up, I always exceeded it, thereby slowing us down.

In 2003 I visited the atelier in Paris where the finishing touches were being made to Ungaro's haute couture collection. Some of the world's most skilled seamstresses are employed there and are, presumably, paid well. Maybe if my mum had been French ... More modestly, whenever I walk past a dry cleaner's and see someone in the window working attentively at a sewing machine, making alterations to dresses and jackets, I think: that's what my mum would have liked to do. So why did she feel that even the occupation of seamstress was beyond her? Technically it would surely have been achievable with a degree of diligence, training (less formal and rigorous than an apprenticeship) and practice. How low her expectations of herself, her sense of self-worth, must have been not even to have attempted this. Her sense of life was that everything universally granted to everyone else was beyond her.

If she wasn't sewing she was knitting. Like Tom Daley she'd knit away while we were doing other things – watching TV in the living room, mainly. Next to her chair, on the orange oojamaflip, she had a felt quiver of knitting needles which I regarded as arrows for my bow even though I had no bow, just the knitting-needle arrows and a fondness for Robin Hood. She'd knit whole blankets out of little squares, often made with wool from an old sweater she'd unravelled. I'd forgotten this until I read a story by Elizabeth Taylor describing this very process, but phrases intoned by Mum as she worked – 'knit one, purl one' – accompanied by the lightly hypnotic and percussive clack of needles, were an ever-present part of my consciousness, even if I've never taken the trouble to find out what these words mean in practice. As well as cardigans and jumpers, she also made animals – a lovely little stuffed brown bear with button eyes and white paws – and, for a while, Gonks.

As a kid I never wore a sweater that my mum had not knitted. Nothing wrong with that, of course, and no embarrassment attached to it. Half the kids at Naunton Park wore homemade sweaters knitted by mums every bit as adept as mine. There was shame later, at grammar school, for the boy whose mum made him a blazer. It was so badly made – of thick material, boxy in shape – that it looked like a donkey jacket, minus the plastic across the shoulders. The poor boy paid a high price for that money-saving blazer. We reminded him of it every chance we got by writing MEB backwards, in chalk, on a hymn book, and slapping it on his back so that he became branded as an employee of Midlands Electricity Board. He was like a proletarian Hester Prynne, daily branded, behind his back, with a blurry white version of the ignominious scarlet letter. In the 1980s, when I was living in Brixton, several of my friends sported donkey jackets as they stood outside the tube station selling copies of *Socialist Worker* in the indifferent Thatcherite cold. Conscious of that kid in school and of my dad's wearing one at weekends (which was strange since he was so pleased to go to work in a jacket and tie), I was never tempted to adopt this revolutionary affectation.

Shortly after we'd moved into the house on Woodlands Roads my mum acquired a second-hand knitting machine. It was an ugly, ungainly thing that took over the whole of the already depressing dark-wooden table in the living room. This enabled her to produce on a larger scale but it took the pleasure out of knitting, turned the living room into a factory.

This same tendency was repeated in the garden after my dad gave up his allotment. Our neighbours had no interest in gardening so they let him cultivate their vegetable patch at the far end of their unused lawn, down by the brook: a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby we had extra vegetables (some of which he gave to them as a voluntary tithe) and their garden was kept neat and tidy. Since this involved extra work it was a stroke of luck that he somehow came into possession of a rotavator. On the one hand, this made digging the garden(s) quicker, more efficient. On the other it, like the knitting machine, imparted a quality

of industrialisation to what had been in some ways a bucolic hobby. While reducing the amount of work it also increased the work-like aspect of what had to be done. In pre-rotavator days my parents, at roughly designated parts of the year – largely unnoticed by me, I had no intention of getting involved – dug and planted. Post-rotavator the looming need to rotavate the garden became a topic of conversation, announced always as an impending obligation and chore. And when the work commenced the noise of the engine and general effort involved in deploying this labour-saving machine turned the garden into a construction site. In our own small way we had replicated the transformation of England from a rural agrarian society to a semi-industrialised one which left the workers exhausted and unhappy, enslaved by the technology that was intended to be the engine of their liberation.

It needs to be emphasised: I did not lift a finger to help. At the allotment I had been an eager if unhelpful helper. By the time I was fifteen I no longer joined in with my parents' labours and showed no interest in learning any of the skills my dad possessed in abundance. He was good at arithmetic – mental arithmetic especially – and in the first years of grammar school had helped me with my maths homework. I continued to struggle with maths but gradually the stuff we were doing in class moved beyond his knowledge. More generally, school would become the sole arena of learning and books the only tools. This was not entirely my fault. (That might be an alternative title for this book; read by a solipsistic light nothing was my fault, even all the things that were.) My dad was a meticulous craftsman but a terrible teacher, always preferring to show me how to do things rather than let me try to do them for myself with the attendant certainty of mistakes being made. So instead of learning on the job and training my hands I became a passive observer of his perfect craftsmanship. ('If your dad puts up a shelf,' my mum liked to say, 'the wall will come down before the shelf.') This could have turned me into a consumer, a purchaser of other people's expertise, someone who paid carpenters and skilled tradesmen to build bookshelves, but I *had* thoroughly absorbed another of my dad's traits, his reluctance to pay other people to do anything and so, as a compromise, I became what I have remained: an incompetent, initially enthusiastic, wildly impatient, cost-cutting, tantrum-prone bodger. How many times my wife has come home from work and, after briefly surveying the wreckage of whatever project was in progress when she left in the morning, said, with regal forbearance, 'I see Billy Bodge has put in another pyrrhic shift.' All worth it, though, for those admittedly rare days when the (more or less) completed job would be acknowledged with an exclamation of approval, 'Bodgetastic!'

The period of most frequent visits to Shropshire came in 1972 when my grandmother was dying with TB. It wasn't really TB but, just as D. H. Lawrence could not admit to himself that he was dying of tuberculosis, no one wanted to say that she had lung cancer, even though any other diagnosis would have constituted less a medical breakthrough than a full-blown miracle. She smoked ... I was going to say 'like a chimney' but that's not right: she was a human chimney, always with a fag in her mouth, her eyes behind her glasses squinting through smoke, her white hair stained yellow, never not coughing. Coughing, in fact, was her way of *breathing*. Children are supposed to feel tenderly towards their grannies but if my feelings strayed beyond indifference it was in the direction of revulsion. In retrospect I should add gratitude, since without her example it's possible that cigarettes might have exerted more of a pull than they did. I didn't even like calling her Nanna.

After her death my grandad went to live with Rene, the only one of his four daughters still in Shropshire. Rumours reached Cheltenham that he had been accommodated in a garden shed and so he came to live with Rhoda for a while, and then with us. This last was easily done since Yo and Daryl had been on the move too, from Hall Road to Hawkswood Road, less than a minute's walk away. We could see their house from ours.

My grandad's arrival prompted a surge of Shropshire loyalism in my mum. She quoted approvingly his verdict that the hedgerows of Gloucestershire were not kept as neatly as they were back home, the dry-stone walling (of which, on his daily walks, there was none to be seen) less ... neat again, I suppose. Everything in Worthen had seemed a mess, but from Cheltenham it had become the standard from which to measure the extent of a fall. This green-green-grass-of-home nostalgia was at odds with the way that three of his four daughters – first Hilda, then my mum and then, when she was ill after giving birth to me, her half-sister Yo – felt compelled to get away and head south to the promised land of Cheltenham. On the other hand it made perfect sense. Uprooted from the place and life he knew he made an accommodation with his new circumstances by simultaneously finding fault with them and retrospectively upgrading the quality of life he'd left behind. It continued even at the local level, within the fallen world of Gloucestershire, as he moved from our house to Yo's and then, after an interval, back with us again, before

eventually returning to Shropshire for a final stint with Rene.

His stays with us spanned a period from about 1972 to 1975. One morning we stood together in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil. I was wearing my loons which he referred to, reasonably, as 'sailor's trousers'. He was wearing striped pyjama bottoms which smelled a bit pissy. He began drinking tea in his preferred way, slopping it out of the cup and slurping it from the saucer. There's no reason why this interlude should have lodged in my mind; is there a reason why no others have? The fact that I have so few memories suggests that it wasn't disruptive, having him around, even though the house must have become crowded, with only that one small upstairs bathroom and the narrow kitchen in which this less than memorable scene took place.



I started playing tennis in the garden at home after watching Wimbledon during the end of my first year at grammar school. This is not quite as splendid as it sounds. Repeatedly rolled, doggedly refusing to be flattened, the lawn was just about big enough for badminton but not wide or long enough for a tennis court (let alone for the extra space needed beyond base- and tramlines). At first we didn't bother with a net as we would just be hitting. My dad had been a good player in his youth – there's a photograph of him in his late teens, in tennis whites, lankily holding his racquet outside the family home on Leckhampton Lane – and he stroked the ball towards me. I swiped it back but it flew over the hedge – past the slips, in cricketing terms – into next door's garden. We stopped playing and clambered over the fence to look for the missing ball. After ten minutes we found it in the hedge separating next door's garden from their neighbour on the far side. Frustrating though it was, this search-and-rescue mission defined my attitude to tennis equipment in two important ways. First, I understood that although it is called a *tennis racquet* the function of this implement is not confined to hitting a *tennis ball* but also includes the capacity to prod and poke into hedges, thereby transforming the person wielding it from a *tennis player* to a fringe participant in a hunt, a beater flushing out game (more exactly, the means by which the game might continue) from the vegetation in which the ball has secreted itself. Second, that a tennis ball was not a disposable thing but a rare and valuable item, the loss of which was to be neither countenanced nor endured. It was a point of principle that we would not start playing again until we had found the missing ball and, since the ball went missing every three or four minutes, an hour's tennis only included about a quarter of actual tennis, the remaining three-quarters being spent poking and prodding the bushes in our neighbour's garden. There was an

element of the good shepherd about my father's unwavering determination not to let one of our balls go missing but there was also a stronger hint of miserliness. Couldn't we just let it go and use – and then buy – another? The idea was a literal definition of nonsensical. It made no sense.

For our game the following day my dad tied a length of frayed string to two rusty poles driven into the ground so that we had a net of sorts, or at least a line – the horizontal equivalent of a plumb line, reminiscent of the string at the strawberry-picking fields – over which we tried to hit the ball, though mainly I continued spraying it over the hedge-net, into next-door's garden.

We abandoned this homegrown project before attempting a third session, for obvious reasons; what remained unclear was why we had ever embarked on what was always destined to be an impossible version of tennis. My tennis life thereafter moved to four new venues. First at Montpellier, at the top of the Promenade, where there were about a dozen public courts, half hard and half much-put-upon grass. I played on these courts, off and on, for years, but there was another tennis option, nearer home, down the footpath off St Michaels Road.

We conceive of a town centre spreading out into less densely populated suburbs, which then peter out and give way to the countryside, to villages and farms, to less cultivated and more spacious landscape, until gradually the process reverses itself and we come to the suburbs of the next town. This is accurate, to a degree. But just as the American frontier was not a fixed line, moving steadily westwards – there were, at any given time, areas of unpacified wilderness east of or behind its western-most edges – so, within the ring of the town, there were large pockets of undeveloped land, countryside that had not yet been developed, or areas of prior development that had been abandoned, become overgrown, and were in the process of returning quietly to the countryside, almost as a precondition for subsequent redevelopment. Within a ten-minute stroll of our first house on Fairfield Walk there had been an abandoned railway station at Leckhampton. From the new house on Woodlands Road you could walk down St Michaels Road to an unpaved footpath that ran past another abandoned railway line (with a collapsed bridge or cutting), past the fields of Bournside School, past what would become a new housing estate and the tech college (no relation to the Technical High School in the centre of town) which was in the process of being built when I was in my pre- or early teens, and onto an elegant loop of road called the Park. The total distance was less than a mile and, as in the American West, it was unpacified. To the extent that it was free from the rule of adult law it was like a larger, more extensive version of the lane behind Fairfield Walk, but whereas that had been a site of *play* this was an area of adventure and possibility.

And there was a real American dimension to what went on there, in the form of the family that had moved into number 3 St Michaels Road. The bottom of their garden extended down to a narrow point on the other side of our neighbour's brook where I had my rope-swing and the rickety look-out post – looking out over nothing – in the tree. That's where and how we met. I never learned what they were doing in our little version of the mid-west (was their dad in the CIA, the espionage equivalent of a visiting fellow at GCHQ?) and don't remember where they were from, but they seem, in retrospect, like a pure emanation of California: two blond girls – Martine, my age, Shane, a couple of years younger – and their little brother, also blond, called Pete. Perhaps they really were from California which might explain why their parents, wary of the permissiveness that had recently taken hold – or been let loose – in San Francisco, were stricter than anyone else's. Their children had to be back home earlier than the rest of us, with no flexibility or excuses. During the day, though, there was still scope for adventure. One day Shane (a girl, remember, even though the name was fixed in my and possibly everyone else's mind by Alan Ladd in the eponymous western), Pete and I got into an impromptu stone-throwing fight with a couple of outlaw kids we didn't know. They were on one side of the collapsed bridge over the abandoned railway line, we three were on the other. It was fun in the classic until-someone-loses-an-eye vein, but no one lost an eye so it continued to be fun until the stone-throwing gave way to close-quarter hand-to-hand combat. There had been a slight lull during which we'd all made our way back to St Michaels Road, to the beginning of the footpath, where I got into an actual fight with a boy from the other side who pinned me to the ground and stamped on my wrist. It could have been a lot worse; he could have stamped on my face, so I was relieved to get away with just the humiliation of being so obviously bested in front of Shane who, though not my girlfriend, was the girl I spent more time with than any other – she was also the first girl I had met *accidentally* – and much of that time was spent wondering how to arrange the transition from friend who was a girl to girlfriend. On the evidence of westerns, winning a fight seemed to be a necessary step in that direction and this had clearly not been achieved. The way that I was easily beaten might have been to my advantage; it was all

over so quickly that I could plausibly claim that, technically, it had not been a fight at all. I was also fortunate that this non-fight took place where it did, that we had made the geographically slight but culturally significant retreat from unpaved footpath to street, from wilderness to civilisation and the rule of law. The area in which things could go wrong was strictly limited. As in westerns, again, the most interesting phase of this area occurred when the claims of wilderness and development held each other in a brief equilibrium. While the tech college and housing estate were being built we explored the various structures like archaeologists in reverse, tracing a possible future from the evidence of partial construction. The closer the buildings came to completion the more the excitement mounted, until we crossed from innocent curiosity to blatant trespass. Shane and I would step inside the fitted wardrobes and understairs cupboards of houses, breathing in the scent of the new. There was an erotic thrill to this, obviously, and while this was timeless to us it was as fresh and incomplete as the smell of drying cement, paint, wood. We didn't kiss in the wardrobes, we just stood there in charged and darkened proximity. At the tech college we found a way in through windows, took the keys from the inside of the locked doors and, thereafter, let ourselves in at our leisure. We didn't steal anything apart from the keys – there was nothing to take, just building materials, sacks of unliftable cement, bricks. Access and secrecy were enough.

It's not true that a river ran through it, but the brook that trickled through the bottom of our neighbour's garden, the garden separating my house from Shane's, continued on its way through the in-between zone where the tech was being built. A month or so after the fight that wasn't a fight Shane and I lay on the bright grass, the grass of the field at the edge of the brook, and kissed. A first kiss: one of those unforgettable moments that are nevertheless difficult to recall with any precision. I stuck my tongue in her mouth and waggled it around in there – it seemed a strange thing to do – not because I desired to but because that is what one did and I desired absolutely to do what was done. Apart from that the details that stick in the mind from that moment – blue sky, the sun-stunned green of the grass – have been added later, to intensify a memory that exists as a matter of record. Kissing is part of and prelude to passion but here it was an end in itself; what it was a prelude to was understood to lie further down the road, road in the sense of brook, when the brook became a river, not in minutes, but in the coming weeks or months. After we had finished kissing we kept kissing for a while longer because we didn't know what else to do. We stood up like a fully clothed Adam and Eve after eating a sensationally normal apple, bewildered, not even dishevelled: unseen, uncaught and unpunished. A page had been turned. On the following pages, in the coming weeks, I got to feel her nascent tits. This I duly did, while lying in the grass again, standing up in the built-in wardrobe of one of the houses on the under-construction estate, and in the bedroom of Nick Thomas's house while he snogged and pawed her sister, Martine.

Shane and I also went to the pictures. Going to the cinema had been tinged with sexual possibility ever since Yo and Daryl, knowing that I'd missed out on *Thunderball*, took me to see the next Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*, in 1967 at the Odeon (the Gaumont to my mum and dad). We arrived late which didn't matter, of course, as we could watch the film from the beginning again. Italo Calvino regarded this same cinema-going behaviour as evidence of an Italian readiness to accept the dislocations of modernism, but the more prosaic truth is that the idea of a film as an aesthetically unified work counted for less, the world over, than the *experience* of going to the cinema. We took our seats just before the scene when Bond cuts the shoulder straps of a woman's (yellow?) dress, which falls to the floor revealing her tanned back and knicker-clad bottom. I was looking forward to seeing this a second time but just before it came round again Yo said: 'This is where we came in,' and we got up to leave. This is the only sequence from any Bond film that has ever meant anything to me – and I have still seen it only once.

The sexual component, on that occasion, was confined to the screen; going to the cinema with a girl meant sitting in the back row: a site of mythic sexual possibility. Which is what it remained, a place of opportunity, forever unrealised. What really went on back there? I never found out because the stated intention was always to watch films and the implicit erotic allure of the back row was so explicit that I could never muster up the courage even to suggest to Shane that we sit there. So we plonked ourselves down in a compromised position several rows ahead of the back, slightly to the back of the middle. Still, the transporting darkness of the movies had the desired effect; as we sat side by side Shane allowed me, for the first time, to slide a finger awkwardly inside her. The first time turned out to be the last, may even have been a parting treat. Shane and Martine moved away, back to America, and I moved on – *hoped* to move on – to further romantic adventures.

A short distance from the field where Shane and I kissed for the first time were two rundown tennis courts,

belonging to no one, which you could play on for free. The nets were sagging, full of holes, and the surrounding wire fence rusty with curled gaps big enough for not just dogs but their owners to squeeze through. These courts were not so much disused – we used them constantly – it was more like they had been forgotten, had fallen out of time and beyond any claims of maintenance or ownership. The playing surface of both courts was rutted, uneven, a source of constantly bad bounces, but this didn't matter, because of the balls.

Balls didn't come in a tube back then, in the pre-pressurised early 1970s. They came in boxes of four and were grey. It takes an effort of will to remember this, to accept that there was a time when tennis balls were not yellow but grey, as if the reality were derived from the version broadcast for a fortnight every year on the BBC. The change from grey to yellow could be taken as a sign that, over time, the world has become a more colourful, less dreary place, more daffodil than ash. In all the sports shops in Cheltenham, alongside neatly branded boxes of Slazengers and Dunlops, there was always a large cardboard box full of seconds, from which it was possible to select as many as you liked at heavily discounted prices. It was claimed that they were sub-standard only for cosmetic reasons – rubber protruding from a seam – but many of these balls were available as seconds because they didn't fulfil their first requirement: to bounce properly, to function as *tennis balls*. This, naturally, did not stop us buying them; it just meant that we spent more time rummaging through the box, squeezing the balls like canny old women testing fruit at a market, before making a selection. Also, the only tactic in tennis back then was to rush the net, and poor-quality balls with unpredictable bounces were an incentive to volley.

I've put the cart before the horse, the ball before the racquet! As part of the transition from hitting haphazardly in the garden – with an old cobwebby racquet lying around in the garden shed – to playing on actual courts, we had to buy a proper racquet.* And as with the Red Feather from Williams Cycles the racquet I ended up with at Dave Courtney's Sports Centre shop was not the one I really wanted – for both the opposite and the same reason. Fearing that I'd grow out of it as I was speedily outgrowing the bike, my parents got me a racquet that was heavier and with a thicker grip-size than was ideal. Like the Red Feather it was inferior to and cheaper than the one that had taken my fancy. As we were preparing to pay ... I put it like that rather than the less cumbersome 'about to pay' because the latter phrase suggests something casual, almost unconscious, with none of the premeditated caution that cash transactions always engendered in my dad. So, *as we were preparing to pay* my dad announced that he had heard that members of the East Gloucestershire Tennis Club got a ten per cent discount.

'Yes, sir,' said the lank-haired assistant. 'You're a member of the club?'

'No, I'm not,' my dad replied, adding the characteristic increment of absolute honesty – a plot twist of unerring straightness – to a situation which could have been concluded to everyone's satisfaction in a matter of seconds by a simple and unquestioned 'Yes.'

The shop assistant did not know quite how to deal with this unusual negotiating strategy. Attempting to sum up – or perhaps just understand – my dad's position, he said, 'So you want a discount even though you are not entitled to one?'

'I know people who aren't members who have been given a discount.' *Did* he, though? If so he'd kept this valuable bit of intel to himself. Not knowing anyone who was a member of the club was certainly compatible with knowing plenty of people who weren't, but non-member discount-getters ... The assistant disappeared behind the ribbon curtain to consult with his manager about this contradictory request. There were other customers in the shop, surveying football boots, squeezing balls from the box of seconds, waiting to be served, not unaware of what was taking place. During the pandemic it was sometimes said that one could almost see Covid floating in a room. At that moment the air in Dave Courtney's Sports Centre was composed entirely of embarrassment. It wasn't just me. Except for my dad everyone there breathed in an oxygen of embarrassment and breathed out a kind of heightened or super-saturated embarrassment which was then breathed in and further recirculated. Even the poor racquet lying on the counter, unsure of its fate and ultimate worth, looked tense. After a few minutes the manager emerged from the back room, trailing coloured ribbons, followed by the assistant who went over to the other customers, ostensibly to serve them but probably to distract their attention from what was going to be either an escalation of embarrassment or *both* an escalation of embarrassment and the setting of a potentially dangerous precedent whereby anyone could come in and insist on a discount because they had heard of someone who had. Meanwhile, presumably to bring this excruciating episode to an end and get the stubborn customer off the premises, the manager agreed to the invalid discount, adding, in a note of legal self-protection, 'as a one-off courtesy'. My

dad was unrepentant. He left the shop with his head held high. I followed, holding the racket sheepishly down by my side, a discreet symbol not of ruthless business acumen or even of a pyrrhic financial victory. It was more a totem of my dad's inability to calculate gain, or more precisely *saving*, in relation to anything other than itself. He'd got his discount and he'd got it honestly. The price paid for this saving, the incalculable loss of face, was irrelevant.

Although tireless in pursuit of savings he did not always achieve the success enjoyed in that battle of wills at Dave Courtney's. Some years later, we went back to a shop to attempt to rectify a problem regarding a defective product. The fact that I can remember neither the shop nor the issue suggests that it was nothing major, but it was precisely in the realm of the minor – infractions, discounts and savings – that my dad specialised, for a very simple reason: the big decisions in his life, the ones that led to his being made redundant, were made by other people, people he did not know and who did not know him. He pressed his case for a long time before eventually ... One can't say 'throwing in the towel', that would have been too active a gesture of defiance; it was more like he allowed the towel to fall, leaving himself exposed and naked.

'Well, you're looking at a very disappointed man,' he said at last.

'I can see that,' said the assistant, thereby granting my dad a kind of inverted victory.

I witnessed this disappointment several times, at close quarters. I'd grown out of my public-spirited, Mum-induced belief that the only purpose of fireworks was to maim and blind, and one Bonfire Night, after much time-wasting uncertainty about whether we were or were not going, my dad and I belatedly set out for the big firework display at Whaddon football ground. We arrived at the stadium, paid the admission and went in – just before the final fireworks splattered the night sky. The glow faded into dark silence, followed by a round of that-was-good-value applause which also faded. The show was over and there was no one but me to whom my dad could convey his disappointment, which he did, repeatedly, after we trudged out of the stadium – within minutes of hurrying in – and began driving home. It stuck in his craw that the woman at the ticket office, knowing that things were coming to an end, hadn't let us in for free. She should have shown some initiative, he said. He placed great value on initiative, though this was only ever expressed negatively, when he encountered a lack of, which he did, constantly.

My dad's capacity for the experience and expression of feeling hard done by were, in the end, his only weapons and they were, by definition, almost worthless. There is a distinguished history of disappointment in literature but the striking thing about my dad's investment in the lived version of the genre is that it was not underwritten by any real possibility of hope or redemption. It's not as if he had great expectations that were thwarted. No, his hopes and expectations were meagre at the outset and yet he was, with a few exceptions – a ten per cent discount here, a free Wall's choc-ice there – disappointed even in these. He had a phrase for this. X 'had done the dirty on' Y. This might have been a euphemism for being shat on, but its power was enhanced rather than diminished by removal from the crudity of scatological abuse. I say power but it referred to a situation of powerlessness since it was never used actively: one never did the dirty on anyone, the dirty was only ever done on one. The moral high ground was gained by being ruthlessly trampled underfoot. Frequently we heard that X had done the dirty on Y, but mainly someone or something – some faceless institution – did the dirty on *us*. The experience of the peasantry, rural labourers and factory-workers over the course of centuries found expression in this little phrase. But as long as you could say it, as long as this was a true and faithful rendering of accounts – not, for example, to falsely claim you were a member of the East Glos Tennis Club – you were unsullied. To use the language of losing athletes denied medals by dopers and cheats, my parents were *clean*.

Aside from visits to the Shurdington relatives, get-togethers on Boxing Day and the occasional outing for chicken-in-the-basket at the Mill or the Frogmill, the other fixture of my parents' social life was the annual party at my dad's work. That party, hosted either by Spirax Sarco or by Heat Transfer as it later became, was the one event in the year when a babysitter was enlisted to keep an eye on me, the one night of the year when they would go out without me. They went with Yo and Daryl and always rounded off the evening with a cup of tea at home. It was not a party in the sense of a social gathering with free drinks. The workforce, for whom it was a combination of reward and treat, had to fork out for the main component of this treat – booze – so the reward had the potential to become a form of taxation or punishment. This was painfully dramatised the year when my dad, finding himself at the bar, asked one of his bosses if he'd like a drink. 'Thanks, Jack,' came the jovial reply. 'I'll have a double scotch.' I heard my dad narrate this simple tale of exploitation at least three times in the days after the ill-fated party, always with the same outraged

but – remember, he had a good head for mental arithmetic – mathematically un-changeable conclusion: ‘A double!’ Like the Ancient Mariner he kept telling this ghastly tale because that was the only way he could make sense of the all-too-calculable injustice of what had occurred. He was never going to get the money back, but telling the story was a form of therapy just as the acceptance of my dad’s offer was a form of order, two kinds of order, really. His boss had asked for a double scotch; that’s what he’d ordered; and once he’d lodged his order it became an order my dad had to obey without negotiation, without the possibility of saying ‘How about just a single to be getting on with?’ A double scotch – a double *anything* – was not only an extravagance he would not have permitted himself; it was something he would never have inflicted on another human being. And because he was a very modest drinker he couldn’t chug down his own beer quickly and lurk around, empty glass in hand, waiting for a reciprocal offer, for the redemptive words ‘My shout’, which may never have come.

He had his revenge, though. In fact he’d already taken it – and would go on taking it – in the time-honoured form of pilfering from work. He was always bringing stuff home. Pencils: boxes and boxes of them, of every degree of hardness and softness, some of which are still in use today, like the Eagle Turquoise Chemi-Sealed HB used to draft these, the very lines in which it is mentioned. Then there were the staplers and staples, every kind of note- and foolscap pad, hole punchers, ring binders, rubbers. We even had a rarely-used orange guillotine for cutting paper. All of this stationery was useful to me at school, and has remained so in my subsequent line of work. But then there was all the other swag: the tools, presses, clamps, angles and metal-working equipment that lined the walls and crammed the drawers and rafters of his workshop in the garage. Much of this was incomprehensible to me as a kid and is unnameable to me now. The key thing is that there wasn’t just a lot of it; there were multiple multiples of everything. Not all of this everything had been pilfered from work; that aspect of his activities merged into the more general quarter-mastering and hoarding. But leaving aside the garage – oh, and the sheds, three of them, one of which contained material from which a fourth could later be built – all the plunder *in* the house did come from work. It was only after his death that I realised quite how much he’d stashed away in various wardrobes and cupboards. The way that he kept bringing home all this stuff long after there was any need for it raises the question of what this ‘it’ really was. He would not only have denied under oath that it was stealing; if rigged up to a lie-detector the polygraph would have vindicated him because he was convinced, at the core of his being, that no theft was involved. It was an end in itself in much the same way that, to the atheist, life needs no justification beyond itself. During the school holidays he would telephone from work a couple of times a day, ostensibly to chat to me or my mum but really for the satisfaction of making free calls which often consisted of little more than him saying, ‘Well, hello, 56704’ (the second number I learned by heart, after the Victor’s number plate), and my replying, ‘Oh hi, Dad.’ Earlier I wondered why, if it was raining hard when I had to set off for school, he put himself through the ordeal of coming home and putting my bike in the boot of the car. The answer, I think, is that it meant sneaking out of work for half an hour.

My mum’s contribution to this familial project was occasionally to bring home food from the Naunton Park canteen. Having been fed – more accurately, having refused to be fed – dinners at grammar school during the day, at home in the evening I was sometimes served food from my junior school: leftover slop that would otherwise have been thrown away, given to pigs who would probably have turned their snouts up at it. However hard my mum tried to disguise the fact that it was from the canteen I always caught her out. She’d take it out of the stainless-steel serving containers and re-present it, warmed up, on our own plates, but I was onto her, unfailingly. ‘This is from the canteen,’ I’d shout, rejecting it out of hand. Like a witness caught in the first, introductory phase of cross-examination she would concede as much with the reflexive timidity of her reply: ‘Pardon?’ I can see her now, standing in the living room, looking at the guilty plate, unable to cross the threshold of a lie, making her way back to the kitchen with the smuggled but discovered lump of stodgy, desert-dry apple crumble. She never gave up, though. Months would go by and then she’d try the same thing again, perhaps camouflaging the offending item with a yellow thatch of homemade custard – it was always pudding, the main courses were so disgusting there was no chance of passing them off, in any house in the land, as anything other than pigswill – but never with any success.

The nice little boy in the blue sweater in the photograph of the Vauxhall Victor, it will have been noted, was well on the way to becoming ... a less than nice adolescent. This resulted in rows and upsets, more than a few of them food-related. One evening we were eating stewed fruit, from a can rather than the

canteen and therefore perfectly acceptable to me. Just the three of us as usual, no trouble simmering. I was spitting back the stones into the purple liquid of the bowl. After I'd done this half a dozen times I looked up, tilted the bowl towards my dad and asked, with neither irony nor any intention to provoke, 'D'you want some?'

Evidently he didn't. 'You filthy swine,' he said, grabbing my head and shoving it into the bowl. It was such an uncharacteristic outburst I think he felt embarrassed almost as soon as I looked up from this sticky baptism with plum juice and custard dripping from my face and hair.* But it was a minor incident compared with some of those that followed, all provoked by me.

Pop music had not been banned from Fairfield Walk, it had simply been under-subsidised to the extent that it withered away. In the 1970s it came roaring and rocking back to Woodlands Road. Our Jehovah neighbours' teenage son played an important part in this. He had a big collection of rock LPs and lent me a stack of them. Since records could easily get warped, scratched or just worn down by an ageing stylus this was not just generous but risky. I taped all of them on a reel-to-reel using a microphone placed close to the speaker of my record player, the same one we'd had back at Fairfield Walk. I could accommodate roughly three LPs on a spool of tape. It's hard to imagine now just how poor the audio quality must have been or how inconvenient it was to wind backwards or forwards eighty or ninety minutes to find a given track. The first band that I recorded was Creedence Clearwater Revival, who seemed less contemporary than Deep Purple or Wishbone Ash. That was the effect they went for on *Cosmo's Factory*, *Willy and the Poor Boys*, and *Pendulum*, available as a special zero-price, lo-fi, triple-album bootleg on my reel-to-reel.*

That old record player enjoyed only a brief residence at the Woodlands Road recording studios. In my third year at grammar school I was given a stereo for Christmas. This was a great leap forward though it came, naturally, with a familiar element of compromise. My parents bought me a pair of headphones – enormous cushiony things, like a pilot's – so I wouldn't disturb them but the stereo had no headphone jack so I had to unplug the speakers and insert the headphones into a special adaptor which could then be plugged into the speaker outlet at the back of the unit. And then the operation had to be reversed when I wanted to listen to music through the speakers again. A unit with a jack would have been much more convenient but marginally more expensive. Everything my dad did was like that: always saving money in the face of the rival claims of ease, quality or utility. Ultimately, of course, the saving was a complete waste of money; it was so much effort, faffing around connecting and disconnecting, plugging and unplugging, that I barely used the headphones, with the result that my dad was constantly traipsing up to my room, telling me to turn the music down, asking why he'd spent all that money on headphones if I was never going to use them.

The developing interest in rock combined with the new stereo to make me want something else: a guitar, so that, in addition to listening to music, I could play it as well. I got one surprisingly quickly, six months after the stereo, for my birthday. Like Hendrix I was left-handed so the strings had to be reversed. That was the first problem. The second, already established by the way that I was one of the handful of musical dunces consistently assigned a triangle during music classes, was that I had no musical ability whatsoever. After the initial outlay on the guitar itself my dad was unwilling to shell out for music lessons and so I had somehow to learn to play this baffling instrument from Bert Weedon's guide, which was doubly difficult to understand because it was intended for right-handers and I couldn't read music. The amazing thing about a guitar, I soon discovered, was that trying to play it was no fun at all. Even tuning it was complicated. The first exercise was 'Jingle Bells' and I did not progress to the second. This became an important moment in my psycho-economic relationship with my dad. I'd badgered him into letting me have a guitar and then, within a month of getting one, gave up trying to play it. From this, according to my dad, a general lesson could be derived: I didn't really want the things I said I wanted.

This had a complex pre-history. Back at Fairfield Walk I'd wanted a puppy. My dad was absolutely opposed to having a dog – Yo and Daryl had a 'yapper' and from this he extrapolated that *all* dogs were yappers – so that was never considered as a serious possibility. Since I was allergic to cats I transferred my affective expectations to something else: a rabbit. From my dad's point of view a pet rabbit had the twin advantages of being entirely silent and never setting foot in the house. He duly bought a rabbit and built a neat prison-hutch in the back garden. In less than a fortnight I lost all interest in this little creature whose sole purpose in life was to turn its entire hutch into a stinking toilet. I don't know what happened to it, only

that I was very happy when I came home from school one day to discover that the stupid rabbit and its toilet-cage were nowhere to be seen or smelled.

As with the all-dogs-are-yappers claim, however, the larger point – that I didn't want what I wanted – was not fair. I had made ample use of the tennis racquet that had been so painfully acquired at Dave Courtney's. What the two pieces of equipment had in common was the non-availability of lessons, but my dad's attitude to tennis coaching was more complex than his outright refusal to countenance music lessons. While acknowledging the benefits of tennis coaching he was not going to fork out for it. The no-budget compromise was always to try to play someone better than me, as if competitive proximity would enable superior, expensively acquired technique to freely transmit itself across the net without the need for either instruction or expenditure. He sort of had a point. There was less technique to be learned back then; you didn't have to worry about grip-changes (how could you when, if your first serve went in, you played out the point with a spare ball in your hand?) but many of the deficiencies of my game today can be traced back to the lack of any disciplined foundation half a century earlier. You might say that this arrangement didn't sound much like a compromise – and you'd be right. Compromise came from the way that, to increase the availability of superior players, my dad paid for me to join the East Gloucestershire Tennis Club as an off-peak junior member. If he was aware of the irony of the situation – or even of the strange mixture of motives lying behind this decision to invest in my game – he made no mention of it. There were plenty of good opponents at the East Glos, most of them older than me, all playing a significantly higher level of tennis. (It was at the East Glos that I first heard the word 'county' used as a designation of quality rather than geography, as in 'He plays for the county.') Even within the pool of players of roughly my age and adjacent but superior quality there was a problem – more accurately two problems that became one problem. The people who were better than me consistently beat me and this was demoralising for me and boring for them. Playing tennis meant losing at tennis but this was preferable to what came next when my opponents, having tired of these easy victories, no longer wanted to waste their time administering repeated thrashings. So, having not had lessons, the substitute for lessons meant I had no one to play with. As an only child this at least had the virtue of familiarity. The solution to what had begun as a two-fold problem was itself two-fold. First, I ended up going to the East Glos mainly to hit against the wall, which had the effect of baking in the errors that would come to define my later game. Second, I lapsed back into playing with anyone from school who happened to be free, either at Montpellier, or the courts down the footpath, both more conveniently located than the East Glos.

Before then, when I'd been a member of the East Glos for about nine months, an event took place that, like all the best sequels, contrived both to resolve and extend, cancel out and deepen the original – the original, in this case, being the episode of the racquet purchase that had taken place eighteen months previously. I played at the club with my dad. He came as my guest, wearing a white shirt – the sort you might wear to an office with a tie – with the sleeves rolled up, and long trousers so that he looked, at a time when everyone played in *very* short shorts, like a refugee from the heyday of Fred Perry. The trousers were not just long; they were, to adapt the title of the Procol Harum hit, a darker shade of cream rather than white as the rules specified. After fifteen minutes a member of staff came up to talk to this unfamiliar figure, presumably about what was both stylistically anomalous (the trousers) and a slight infringement (rather than a flagrant breach) of the dress code but, after some discussion, allowed us to stay. My dad played on, as unembarrassed as he had been at Dave Courtney's during the attritional discount tie-break. There might have been some kind of shadow class question at work because the East Glos was a distinctly middle-class club. This is not to say that he was viewed suspiciously because he was unsuitable, not of the right class; he was questioned because he stood out like a slightly sore thumb and lowered the tone aesthetically, but it's also true that this subtly off-colour outfit of his was partly the expression of a class identity – a class that was not excluded from the club but which tended not to belong to it.

Again, this is a version of the kind of scenario which, in America, manifests itself in racial terms. As it happens there was what might have been a racialised version of my dad's brush with the East Glos authorities when, years later, I played there with Feisal, one of three black kids at school and probably the second poorest pupil after the MEB donkey-jacket wearer. As a member I was allowed a guest, but given that my membership had lapsed several years previously and the way that, under the baleful influence of John McEnroe, we spent the entire match effing and blinding, it would have been reasonable for a few eyebrows to have been raised at what was, after all, a private club with an agreed code of behaviour. After one invective-filled exchange – a baseline rally along the lines of 'That was fucking in!' 'No it fucking wasn't!' 'Yes it fucking was!' – a man on the neighbouring court paused in his service motion, caught the tossed but unhit ball, looked over at us and, in a remarkable display of plummy tolerance and proto-

inclusiveness, said: 'That's the spirit!'

In the third or fourth form I acquired an additional bike, a so-called tracker. This was a forerunner of a BMX, intended for off-road use though the cow-horn handlebars made it less stable and controllable than my racer. Similarly, while these off-roads were assumed to be muddy the absence of mudguards was one of the things that made a tracker a tracker. It had three gears which often slipped, another feature that rendered it unsuited to the purpose for which it had been intended. While its functionality was close to zero the cow-horns gave the bike the outlaw aspect of a chopper, a Hells Angel's hog. Essentially, it was a bike on which one rode into – and caused – trouble. The kind of trouble? Doing wheelies and powering along the muddy, narrow, unpaved, puddly footpath at the bottom of St Michaels Road down towards the tennis courts, as fast as possible, where elderly pedestrians were likely to be walking their dogs, and other cyclists coming the opposite way, also at yob-speed.

I bought this harmlessly antisocial steed from a boy at school who rode it to my house to finalise the deal. We had agreed a price which then had to be validated by my dad, who deemed the bike to be overvalued and persuaded this kid to take a twenty-five per cent cut. On the basis of the bike's subsequent performance this was both entirely accurate *and* totally unfair. My dad's attempt at getting a discount on my first tennis racquet involved abasing himself whereas now he was taking advantage of a schoolboy as powerless as a shop owner accepting protection from a mobster. And he knew this. After the revised terms had been reluctantly accepted, he agreed to revert to the previously arranged price. As I later had cause to say to Yo on multiple occasions in the last decade of my dad's life, by which time the compulsion to save money at any cost had become all-consuming: yes, he was unbelievably tight but he was also and always, at the deepest level, *honourable*.

That tracker had nothing going for it except the cow-horns. My proper bike, though, the anonymous racer that I'd upgraded to after outgrowing the Red Feather, became my trusted companion, the new 'old faithful' of the cowboy song I'd sung in the Cotswolds. We roamed the ranges of Cheltenham together, this second-hand, ten-speed steed and me. On it I achieved an ambition I'd been too chicken to undertake on the smaller Red Feather. This involved slogging up Leckhampton Hill as far as possible, before it got too steep to pedal any further. After that I pushed the exhausted bike upward and onward for another twenty minutes, towards the high-altitude summit of Birdlip. Helmet-less, and having taken the precaution of securing my extensive flares with cycle clips, I got back in the saddle and plunged back down the curving hill. The gradient was so steep that within seconds I broke through cycling's equivalent of the sound barrier in that I reached a speed which made it impossible, even in the highest gear, to apply added pressure to the pedals. I've no idea of the speed I eventually attained as, hunched low over the drops to maximise aerodynamic efficiency, the world flew silently and dangerously past, beneath and around me. Car doors opening, vehicles emerging from drives, potholes (of which, in those well-maintained days, there were admittedly very few): these were just some of the hazards that could have been encountered in the course of this possibly paralysing, brain-damaging, potentially lethal escapade. It's unlikely that, at this outside-of-the-envelope rate of descent, a helmet would have offered significant protection if I had come off. Even after the road flattened out and became busier – oblivious pedestrians and their dogs, more junctions, parked and manoeuvring cars – and the pedals again offered a show of resistance, the accumulated momentum of descent meant that I was still whizzing along at circumstantially terminal velocity. But nothing happened. I'd made it down unscathed and in one piece, in no time at all.

At school we were always swapping, borrowing or lending LPs but because there was no room for albums in the book- and football-crammed lockers they had to be perched on the top. As a result an uncured, daily-changing exhibition of the art of the album cover was on constant display. Anyone could contribute to this exhibition by putting a record up there; doing so for the first time was a significant moment in one's advance up the school's hierarchies. My debut offering was *Anyway* by Family with its unusual design consisting of cover art by Leonardo da Vinci (*Mortars with Explosive Projectiles*) in a frosted plastic envelope. Da Vinci's drawing prompted much art-critical discussion. Were the exploding projectiles teeny boppers at the front of an allegorical gig while the heads were at the back, taking it all in? How strange that we considered it better to be at the back than at the front. At gigs you want to be as close to the front as is compatible with not getting beaten up by Angels (Altamont) or lurching around in the mosh pit (as it was later known). Looking back it's surprising that the art teachers at school (there were two) did not use this

album as a way of introducing us to the work of da Vinci and thereby the Renaissance, perspective and pretty much everything else too.

It wasn't just *Anyway* and, anyway, it wasn't just Family. The musical content of more than a few albums was of subsidiary interest to the gnostic mysteries inscribed and conceptualised within the expansive sanctum of the gatefold sleeve. Each new design raised the stakes, challenging rival bands to go for something more ambitious, exceeding the brief of containing, protecting and displaying its contents. The corollary of this is that a simple sleeve was a sign that the band lacked ambition, clout, imagination and probably listeners. So elaborate and complex did album covers become that the music was a kind of bonus, though no band took the logical next conceptual step of releasing a cover without any record inside. As it was, *finding* the record buried within the layers of packaging became an exercise in the erotics of audio-visual undress. (Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* took the form of a sixteen-page newspaper.) Naturally this tendency proceeded in tandem with the increasingly lavish tours undertaken by the likes of Emerson, Lake & Palmer, who had so much equipment to cart around that the top of each of three giant trucks was embellished with the name of one of the band members, all of which seemed an attempt to hide in plain sight the fact that no one at our school liked *Tarkus* or *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

One of the reasons for the fast-changing display of albums was the record library, a pupil-originated initiative that was a well-established part of school life. You paid a subscription (small) and then borrowed records for a negligible amount of money. The library met after classes, once a week, and the stock consisted almost entirely of rock, mainly progressive with a faint dusting of folk: Joni Mitchell, Steeleye Span, Sutherland Brothers & Quiver. The Beatles had faded from sight by then, as had Creedence. Too young to have caught Bob Dylan in his thin wild mercury phase, we were conscious of him only as a spent force in the early 1970s. Bands we knew little about beyond their exotic names – Tonto's Expanding Headband, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Atomic Rooster, Grand Funk Railroad – were represented by an album or two (movie-style poster of a cowboy and his expired steed in Monument Valley on Home's first, *Pause for a Hoarse Horse*; untitled meat hanging on hooks in a warehouse in the case of the Edgar Broughton Band's third), but the library had extensive holdings of work by the big hitters: Deep Purple, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Yes, the Who. Since the record library ran for years I'm unsure exactly which records were available at which time so in memory they were all there together: *Argus* alongside *Fireball*, *Hunky Dory*, *Nantucket Sleighride*, *Tommy*, and, at the end of the alphabet, *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* and, of course, the totemic, much-borrowed, consequently battered *Woodstock* triple.

Our taste was advanced. We may have started with 'Ride a White Swan' but soon hit the harder stuff. Avid readers of the *NME*, *Melody Maker* and *Sounds*; habitual watchers, a little later, of *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, we despised *Top of the Pops*, which we endured in a state of almost unfailing frustration. It was the 'almost' that kept us coming back for more, every week without fail, our loyalty occasionally rewarded by something unexpectedly decent: 'Tokoloshe Man' by John Kongos or 'Hold Your Head Up' by Argent.

Just as everyone at school who was interested in football supported a particular team so, by extension, anyone who was into music chose a group or two for special devotion. So 'Man U' and 'Mountain' or 'Liverpool' and 'Led Zep' might share equal billing, in black-capital biro, on your satchel. Ideally you supported a group that was not over-subscribed by too many other pupils. The coolest kid in my year, Mike Drake (who, to our astonishment, had a letter printed in *Sounds*), claimed 'You haven't heard music till you've heard Heads Hands & Feet,' a band no one had even heard of until this proclamation was issued. My first loyalty was to Family but over time I drifted towards Van der Graaf Generator (whose *H to He, Who Am the Only One* orbited the lockers like an earthbound space station) and Hawkwind, whose first album was also part of the de facto permanent collection.

I was thirteen when the record library acquired the band's second album, *In Search of Space*, soon after it blasted off in October 1971. I borrowed it, listened to it, studied the accompanying booklet, 'The Hawkwind Log', conscious even then that I was on a more advanced stage of a flight path or trajectory established by Wall's ice cream and their 'Moon Fleet' log. I bought my own copy the following summer when Yo and Daryl took Tina and me to London for a week's holiday. That was the summer of the hit single 'Silver Machine'. The crucial point, the point of honour, is that I was into Hawkwind before they had this fluke hit.

In June of that year an unbelievable poster appeared on the railings of Cox's Meadow, near the East Glos Tennis Club. Hawkwind were headlining a free festival there on 8 July 1972. No event from my adolescence was more psychologically determining than this one. My whole attitude to England, to festivals, maybe to life, was affected by what happened that afternoon. In the morning it started raining; no one else wanted to come to the festival, but I went anyway. On the edge of the dispiriting field, trees sheltered beneath heavy umbrellas of leaves. There were maybe twenty people standing around on the

soggy grass. Drawing closer, socks and loons already wet, I watched a couple of roadies traipsing across the stage, fiddling with gear, without energy or urgency. One of them seemed completely bewildered by the task. You could almost see the thought bubble over his head: *Where did I put that cable? I had it in my hand two seconds ago. Ah, here it is, in my other hand.* Everything about the stage before a band comes on exudes the quality of something poised to happen. That vibe was entirely absent, though there was a definite sense, under the space-dark sky, of heavier rain on the way. Gradually, the atmosphere turned into a rumour which then assumed the status of unverified but reluctantly accepted truth: Hawkwind would not be coming. It was, as a bedraggled hippy said to me, a washout. I called my dad from a phone box by the park gates to ask him to come and pick me up. Luminously red from the outside, the phone box smelled of a gloom that was both specific to Gloucestershire and – the expectations engendered by Hawkwind still lingered – cosmically vast. Versions of that afternoon's feelings would be repeated in the years to come, in different ways, at rainy picnics, watered-down garden parties, flooded festivals and, even though I never went, on Wimbledon afternoons at home, watching the black-and-white rain lash down on the court covers. Crushed expectations, dampened hopes, became part of my personal meteorology. When we were first married my wife could not understand why I became so utterly despondent and full of fury if something we were looking forward to was spoiled or cancelled because of the weather. She would have understood if she had been there on that rain-obiterated day in Cox's Meadow, when Hawkwind failed to appear.

Since I have high hopes of this book being turned into a Hollywood blockbuster I'm glad that I'm able, without any distortion, to add the wished-for episode of redemption here. With the success of 'Silver Machine' the band had the money to put on the spectacle they had long dreamt of: the Space Ritual. Tour dates were announced in the *NME*, and Cheltenham – Town Hall, 17 January 1974 – was included in the schedule of this astral son et lumière.

The first band I ever saw was Family at the New Theatre in Oxford – Richard Nutter's parents drove us there and back, had dinner in a restaurant while we were at the gig – and since then I'd seen the Groundhogs, and Man at the Town Hall, but they now seemed like support acts for this. Nick Thomas and I got there early and while we were walking through the bar area I spotted something incredible. Unnoticed by less alert fans, four members of Hawkwind were sitting round a table, drinking. We sidled up and asked for their autographs. 'Because you're pop stars,' I said. I was being ironic!

'We're musicians,' corrected one of them.

Simon King, Dave Brock and a now illegible other signed our tickets – yellow, with the Hawkwind logo in red – very graciously, without fuss. Stacia, who sometimes danced naked on stage (not that night, disappointingly), wrote 'Lot of everything xx' and gave me a peck on the cheek.

The gig was fantastic but, from the far side of rave and trance, I wonder how completely Hawkwind transformed Cheltenham Town Hall, how immersive the experience could have been for us, gazing at the light show from our rigid rows of earthbound seats.



By the time of the Space Ritual, there was quite a lot of Hawkwind merchandise to be had. I know because I had a lot of it. A pair of pictures of me (plus, in one of them, my mum) in my bedroom shows the tie-dyed phase when Chelsea paraphernalia and prog rock held each other in brief equilibrium. Internal evidence – album covers, the advert cut from the *NME* for *Chameleon in the Shadow of the Night*, the solo album Peter Hammill put out after the break-up of Van der Graaf – suggest this was taken when I was fifteen, probably just shy of my sixteenth birthday. Chelsea pennants and rosettes are draped from the light fittings but the centrepiece of exhibit A is a long horizontal poster of Hawkwind onstage. Although I had the merch I didn't realise that Hawkwind were a deeply druggy group. The word acid kept coming up in interviews with them but I didn't know what this was and it didn't worry me that I didn't. On that same trip to London when I bought *In Search of Space* I'd also bought a paper called *Frendz* which seemed devoted almost entirely to Hawkwind. On the cover was a picture of balding and bearded Del Dettmar (synth), happily reading the *Dandy*. The agenda of this radical underground publication meant almost nothing to me. I didn't even know what 'underground' meant except, courtesy of the *Oz* trial, obscenity and sex. A printed letter in *Frendz* read something like: 'Nick Kent must be a pretty far-out screw, huh? He writes like a pig brick.' What did that mean? Did it matter that I didn't know?

What mattered – the point that needs to be made – is that by 1973 a version of hippy style had percolated down to the third and fourth form of Cheltenham Grammar. Our most egregious, and therefore frequently thrown insult was 'plastic hippy'. On a wish list for Christmas at about this time I asked for a pair of 'bell bottom hipsters. Colour: purple'. That was an optimistic fantasy, but evidence of hippy style was easy to spot on our Saturday afternoon safaris in the town centre.

We didn't go to cafés or meet for lunch; we just walked around, starting at the eastern end of the High Street, by the Joke Shop, a tiny place selling, among other things, plastic turds and cheap, easy-to-learn magic tricks. Near where I live now, in Venice Beach, there's a daft place called the Mystic Journey Bookstore. In its humble way the Joke Shop was the first step on a road to retail enlightenment represented by the Mystic Journey – a joke of a shop – for it was there, at the Joke Shop, that I bought my first and only pack of tarot cards, probably after hearing about them on *Chameleon in the Shadow of the Night*.

I learned to sort of read the tarot from the illustrated booklet – easier to follow than Bert Weedon's arcane guide to the guitar – that came with the cards, though I think that even in the face of the allusive endorsement from Hammill's song 'Black Room' I still felt more at home with the competitive logic of those potentially profitable games of Newmarket we'd played at Christmas in our front room. Still, I wish I had the cards now, find it hard to believe that I ever got rid of them since I liked the pictures of the Major Arcana, possibly because they were reminiscent of – were perhaps early examples of – panels from the Marvel comics that I collected and which were often to be found piled up in a rather cramped second-hand book and comics store on a side street just round the corner from the Joke Shop. I've still got most of the comics I bought there, some of which are also featured in that evidence-intensive pair of pictures of my bedroom, but all I can think of now is: What happened to those tarot cards in their neat little box? The idea, as I recall, is to consult the cards with a question in mind, so if I went for a tarot reading now, at one of the drongo shops or stalls on Venice Boardwalk, I'd ask if they had any idea where my tarot cards might be.

From the comics shop we'd walk down the High Street towards Stylus Four on Winchcombe Street, a functionally designed, unintimidating record shop, striking a balance between classical (in which we had no interest), pop (next to no) and rock (all-consuming). We went there for the records, obviously, but also as warm-up and preparation for the massive intimidation induced by our next stop, Driftin'. This hippy mecca of our weekly pilgrimages offered a total lifestyle experience: not just prog LPs and underground magazines but the loons, scoop necks and cheesecloth shirts worn while listening to or reading them. The gathering sense of awkwardness with which we mounted the dark, poster-lined stairs was measured by the gradually thickening smell of joss sticks. Sweetly subversive, it increased with every step, accompanied by the thud of music which added an extra pulse of unease by its consistent refusal to be anything we had heard before. Inside the shop itself there were jungly-looking cheese plants, bean bags and – worst of all – people who were *already there*. These people were older than us, had longer hair, seemed relaxed, at home, knew each other, managed somehow both to look at and ignore us. Matching this, we somehow took everything in while hardly daring to look up from the racks of records which offered a measure of sanctuary and focus. We rarely bought anything, partly because we didn't have the money, but mainly because going up to the counter and speaking to the staff – who didn't look like staff – was too embarrassing to contemplate. We had the vocabulary, knew the names of the bands, but didn't dare speak the language. Out of our depth,

self-conscious, intimidated, conspicuous, we soaked up the atmosphere in the belief that by doing so we might gradually become accustomed to and breathe more easily within it. When new people came in we glanced up, hoping that they'd see us, see that *we* were already there, but the baton of long-haired unease refused to be passed on. It was a relief to creep back down the creaking stairs, into the normal, unscented daylight.

While Driftin' was far and away the coolest place, W. H. Smith's and John Menzies (next door to each other) and Woolworths all had good record departments, but with its commanding location at the junction of the High Street and the Promenade, Boots was the best. The record department was upstairs and it was comforting, after the steep ascent to the death-zone of Driftin', to make our way past harmless prints of little boys with big reflective tears rolling from adorable eyes. It was there, at Boots, that we had first listened to tracks from *Electric Warrior* and other albums, within the grey metal grilles of head-high audio booths. Asking if we could hear records seemed always to elicit the mild disapproval of staff since it was understood by all parties that listening was not a prelude to purchase. The staff looked like staff and acted like staff and it was reassuring to have this normal relationship restored even if that meant we teetered on the constant brink not only of having our requests rejected but of being ejected. These requests were legitimate even if we were always pushing our luck, asking for more than the one-track limit, because this was one of the few ways, besides the radio (hard-to-find Luxembourg 208), of hearing music without paying for it. How many things were unaffordable back then – and how readily we accepted this unaffordability as a fundamental condition of life. The difference with my parents' generation is that although in their teens (before 'teenager' even existed as a demographic category) they could afford even less, there were so few things for them *to* buy. Mine was a transitional generation lodged quite comfortably between increasingly displayed abundance – the desire to be 'with it' – and historically accepted scarcity: 'Go without.' If I had to boil down my parents' religion – an utterly secular one as far as my dad was concerned – to a single, two-word commandment, that would be it. Inevitably, this religion had its version of Hell, also known as hire-purchase or HP: a sure-fire route to financial damnation, to getting in over your head, into the red and dread of ever-increasing debt, all for the sake of some thing or things you could do without.

From Boots we'd head for the Promenade, sometimes cutting through Cavendish House, the fragrance-smelling department store which also had a decent record department. (Years earlier, as part of a school project at Naunton Park, I'd described Cavendish House as a place 'where the likes of us cannot afford to shop'. My mum insisted this was not true – though, needless to say, we never shopped there.) Other times we'd troop past the Boer War memorial and the First World War memorial and on to the poster shop, opposite the statue of Dr Edward Wilson (who died with Scott in the Antarctic in 1912). Further up the Promenade, outside the Queen's Hotel, there is a spiky memorial to the Crimean War, so while Cheltenham advertises itself as 'the centre of the Cotswolds' it's quite a little hub of imperial remembrance too, though this was not evident, in 1972, in the Athena shop.

I call it that but can't remember if it was exclusively devoted to Athena posters and am not even sure if it was a self-contained retail unit rather than just an upstairs annex of W. H. Smith's or John Menzies. The experience of browsing here was like an enlarged version of perusing records: just as we flicked through the racks of LPs so, here, we heaved the cellophane-covered, cardboard-supported posters from one side of the V-shaped bays to the other. And many of the posters were of the same rock gods whose albums we'd flicked through a few minutes earlier at Boots. Did pop stars control image rights back then? Were the posters another of the multiple revenue streams flowing into their country estates in Sussex or their houses perched in Laurel Canyon? I had a black-and-white poster of Roger Chapman, the sweat-drenched vocalist of Family, on my bedroom wall. My dad objected to it because he looked 'full of drugs'. He did, probably was, though I didn't know this at the time.

In addition to photographs of rock stars there were large-scale versions of album-cover art, though this generalised memory might be traced back to a single source: the other-world fantasy-scapes by Roger Dean (of Yes and Osibisa fame), since his are the only works I can bring to mind. I have similar doubts as to whether posters were available of what in retrospect is the best art to have emerged from this period, the psychedelic posters advertising gigs and happenings. It's a style we associate with the Grateful Dead though no one at school had any interest in the music of the Dead.

What an education they were, these posters. As well as iconic images (Che, Dalí's *Narcissus* and Robert Capa's falling Republican soldier captioned with the philosophically and politically unanswerable question 'WHY?') and ones cynically destined for the walls of adolescents' bedrooms – chick walking to the tennis net in a white dress, revealing her knickerless bottom (which I admired but did not own) and a skeleton

slumped on a toilet (which I did) – the main figures of western art from the Impressionists onward were well represented.

Athena was just the tip of a postering iceberg, since melted. Posters of every kind were all the rage back then. A few times I asked at the ABC or Odeon for posters after the run of a particular film had come to an end. I have Sam Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron* (1977) in mind, but if they really did give it to me it was lost ages ago. (How I wish I'd kept *everything*; if only I'd had the foresight, aged eleven, to invest in a storage unit with archival-quality temperature control.) On that trip to London with Yo and Daryl we bought posters from the Imperial War Museum, including the American Uncle Sam declaring: 'I Want You for U.S. Army' – with eyes that followed you around the room – and one of Churchill, making his famous V for Victory sign, to annoy my dad, who loathed Churchill because he was a Tory.

These Saturday outings often climaxed or, more accurately, anti-climaxed, with a return to the High Street as we joined the handful of people gathered to observe the silent testimony of football results through the window of one of the shops selling TVs. The most depressing part of this ritual was always the Scottish League Division Two, but it was even worse at home when the visual evidence was accompanied by the funereal recitation of team names: Stenhousemuir, Raith Rovers, Dumbarton, Stirling Albion. Unlike the shipping forecast with its poetry of fathomless but avoidable peril, each result spoke only of the futility of life, irrespective of whether it was a draw – Arbroath nil, Hamilton Academicals nil – or a six-goal thrashing. Standing there outside the window of the modestly and misleadingly named Radio Rentals, I think each of us, even at the age of thirteen or fourteen, was contemplating something more than the so-called Pools Check. We had a glimpse of how life might end in an underfunded care home in Cowdenbeath (nil) or Brechin City (nil) and how that end might drag on for so long as to make anyone wonder what the point was in going on, even as, gazing through our own disembodied reflections, we continued to pay attention to something not worth watching, in which we had no interest.

The many TVs on which these results were shown were of markedly different quality. The basic choice was black and white or colour but there was considerable variety within the colour spectrum. If watching actual football rather than the football *results*, it was between reasonably sharp picture quality with dull colours – brown for red, grey for blue – or a wobble of sunny yellows and humming blues. That was on a good day. On bad days and certain sets this choice did not apply; then it was a dull blur of ghosts, but since the pitches, ostensibly green, had, by mid-November, become a slurry of brown and were routinely obscured by a mist of drizzle it didn't make much difference. In this broader context the lack of colour and accuracy was either a fair reflection or even an emanation of the quality of the football on display.

Nick Thomas's family had one of the first colour TVs to be seen outside of a shop window or the counter of the Chinese takeaway on Bath Road. My love of scuba and deep-sea divers had ebbed but the programmes I was most curious to see in colour were *Great Barrier Reef* and *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*. When it came to underwater footage the tendency of colour and images to swim or float did little to detract from whatever was happening to the divers and fish gliding through the depths of the blue screen. And then, on Sunday afternoons, I was round there for *Star Soccer*. Despite the American-sounding name this was a heavily localised experience in that it always featured Midlands teams clad, in approximately ascending order of colour complexity without regard to footballing ability: Derby County (white shirts and black shorts), Birmingham City (all blue), Notts Forest (red), Coventry (sky blue), Aston Villa (West Ham colours), Wolves (usually mustardy – but occasionally glowing – gold), Stoke (vibrating red and white stripes), West Brom (even more Bridget Riley-esque, in blue and white).

We were expected, even if only by dint of repeated exposure, to identify with and support these teams but apart from Kevin Gibbard, a Derby County loyalist, no one in my class at school was interested in any of them unless they were hosting a team we did support: Man United, Chelsea, Leeds. Unconscious though it was, our refusal to support these Midlands teams was a form of resistance to the larger programme by which a regional identity was imposed on us. The most important components of this regional identification were the television networks. In the 'regional variations' of the BBC we were part of the Midlands, and the epicentre of the 'local' news and magazine programmes that came after the national news – when we went 'Nationwide' – was Birmingham, a city sixty miles to the north with which we felt no connection whatever. I don't want to exaggerate. This was not a totalitarian annexation but within the democratic broadcast empire small things contrived to make us look north. Like the advert for Brew XI, specially 'brewed by M&B

for the men of the Midlands'. It featured a bunch of blokes in a pub, and a busty barmaid. After the tag line one of these men turns to the camera and asks lustily, 'You seen that Doreen?' He is referring to the barmaid, naturally: Doreen of the big jugs – of beer – that she is eagerly serving. We were not feminists but this advert had something of the anthropological quality of *National Geographic*. Hilaire Belloc, in a poem, refers to the Midlands as 'sodden and unkind' and that's how we regarded the muddy likes of the Baggies, the Potters and the Rams to whom we felt no kindness and with whom we acknowledged no kinship.

We did go to see Wolves once, because they were playing Chelsea at home. A friend of my dad's from work drove us to Molineux, but I had no real sense that we were going to a *town* called Wolverhampton; it just meant travelling to a windswept football stadium on a motorway, the purpose of which was to avoid passing through anywhere, the motoring equivalent of the long-ball game. I had no idea that Wolverhampton even *was* a place except in so far as it was somewhere with a large immigrant – black – population. A TV quiz show of the time featured a segment in which pundits had to come up with a suitably witty caption or speech bubble for a news photograph. One showed Prince Charles meeting scantily-clad natives in an unidentified African village. The winning caption had the prince saying 'How nice to be in Wolverhampton again.'

My sense of where I was and where I was from was derived from my parents and it extended slightly south-west, towards the rural. We had more affinity with what I later learned to call Hardy's Wessex than we did with the industrial Midlands.

The first time we watched a colour TV of our own – even though it was not our own – was when Yo, Daryl, Tina and I went to London on holiday, the 'Silver Machine' trip of 1972.*

We were staying at Auntie Hilda's flat in Putney – and there it was: a Sony Trinitron. Yo was the first to recognise it for what it was: a colour telly. Sitting on a table, an altar to itself, the screen of this wondrous thing was only slightly bigger than the laptop on which I am typing this description. Image (sharper than anything we'd ever seen) and colour (yellow yellows, blue blues and so on, right across the palette) were of unprecedented quality, due partly to superior technology and partly to being concentrated in such a tiny screen, as opposed to floundering and unravelling across the expanse of the Thomases' big-screen scene.

I'd stayed in this flat before, with my parents, when we had come to London for a week when I was about seven, but the TV was of more recent provenance. That was the holiday when my dad had to fork out some unbelievable amount for a choc-ice, outside Madame Tussauds. We also schlepped all the way to Heathrow on the tube, not in order to fly somewhere, just to watch planes take off and land. The airport was a destination in its own right and the nearest my parents would ever come to flying on a plane.

We didn't go out to Heathrow again but aside from that the trip with Yo, Daryl and Tina was just as extensive. We went everywhere, did everything, including getting happily lost in the maze at Hampton Court, but wherever we were this extraordinary piece of technology, the Sony Trinitron, was always luring us back to the flat in Putney, ready and eager to broadcast all shows, including those on BBC2, transforming even the ones in which we had no interest into something radiant, beautiful and new.

My consciousness of BBC2 was shaped mainly by our not having it. We didn't have the necessary aerial – horizontal, more sophisticated and modern-looking than the standard hieroglyph receptive to BBC1 and ITV – and it's possible that our set was not up to snuff either. Since the missing channel's identity was embodied by suave Frank Muir on *Call My Bluff* I'm tempted to claim that there was a class dimension to this technological lack or lag. But how could I have known about Frank Muir and his bow-tie if we didn't have BBC2? Presumably I discovered this later, when we did finally get it, a year after the trip to London with Yo and Daryl, when my Auntie Hilda gave *us* the Sony Trinitron: gave it to my mum, dad and me (which must have put Yo's nose out of joint since, like an explorer, she'd 'discovered' the TV in its natural habitat of Putney). The new TV set provided the necessary incentive to get the special aerial so we Dyers went from black and white to colour *and* BBC2 in a double surge of televisual promotion.

As so often happens in life it turned out that, apart from *Alias Smith and Jones*, what we'd been missing out on wasn't worth having anyway. Being able to watch Pete Duel and Ben Murphy as the two affable outlaws, one a master safe-cracker and card player, the other legendarily fast on the draw, both united by a commendably simple philosophy – Don't get mad, get even – was the sole gain of having BBC2. No one gave a toss about Frank Muir on *Call My Bluff* but I remember the morning after a different *Bluff* – *Coogan's*, starring Clint Eastwood – had been shown on good old BBC1. *Everyone* at school had seen that, just as everyone always watched *Monty Python* every week.

The Trinitron was the second of three significant technological upgrades. At Fairfield Walk we'd had no

phone but at the new house on Woodlands Road we inherited an existing one: a party line, shared with our next-door neighbours, but this was never a problem, for a simple and easily guessable reason. Although teenagers traditionally hung out on the phone my dad instilled in me, without even having to do so, the idea that phone calls were prohibitively expensive. Even *cheap* ones were expensive so I never chatted on the phone, used it almost exclusively for localised arrangement-making, only occasionally for long-distance and never for overseas calls. Was that phone even capable of reaching abroad? A purely academic question since we didn't know anyone who lived there anyway.

The third appliance was the most curious. For her birthday dad bought my mum one of those salon-style hooded hair dryers. After washing and curling her hair she'd perch under it, in her bedroom, looking like a shy astronaut who has somehow landed on a planet that turns out to be a distant suburb of our own. We had it for ages, it probably paid for itself many times over, but it came at the cost of the loss of the silent ensemble of feminine camaraderie that I glimpsed through hairdressers' windows.

On those Saturday walks through town there were occasional glimpses of a larger world of violence embodied by Hells Angels and skinheads. Their antipathy was focused on each other but there was a lurking sense that both groups had enough aggro sloshing around in their respective tribal buckets for it to spill over onto anyone unfortunate enough to find himself in their vicinity. There wasn't a single skinhead at our school but elements of skin culture were in evidence: Sta-Prest trousers, Crombies. This was the respectable or purely decorative part of the skinhead scene, far removed from the full-on bover of braces and DMs, but still viewed with suspicion by the school authorities. Hence the rules of school uniform were strictly enforced to ensure that items which were 'smart' – the term of approval for mods and skins and therefore ostensibly acceptable – were subtly outlawed along with anything scruffy. Occupying an extensive middle ground between 'smart' and the generally scruffier hippy look to which we gravitated, Ben Sherman shirts were both allowable (if white) and highly desirable (less so if white). We *all* wanted Ben Sherman shirts, and I did get one, eventually, though it took a lot of pleading since, as my mum kept saying, 'You're paying for the name.'

Many of the stories of skinhead violence were so widespread that they may well have been urban myths. 'Does your mother sew?' a skin would ask before slashing your face and telling her to 'Stitch this.' Such encounters were so plausible that if a skin even spoke to you – not that any ever did – it was assumed this is what he would say. Fearing skins, assuming them to be a threat, did not prevent us from reading Richard Allen's novels *Skinhead* and *Suedehead*. Not that skins had any special appeal; we were just as keen to read Peter Cave's *Chopper* about 'the king of the angels' and *Mama* about a female biker (with masturbation scene). While our teachers nudged us towards books they thought would be good for us this was the rubbish we wanted to read. As with the Family album and the Leonardo drawing, it's a shame that a forward-thinking teacher did not take our obsession with skins and biker gangs as a starting point and get us to read Hunter Thompson's *Hell's Angels*. Imagine that. You're fourteen, and you're told to read about Hells Angels. We'd have jumped at the chance and our parents wouldn't have minded. They did not just cede all moral authority to the teachers; they looked to teachers to guide their pupils into a land of learning of which mine, for example, were so entirely ignorant as to have no fears of any potential dangers lurking ahead.

Within the school itself there was hardly any trouble. Rarely heard, the longed-for chant of 'Fight, fight, fight' was provoked, typically, by a skirmish that had already dissolved or been broken up by the time we'd had a chance to rush to the scene in numbers. Rumbles of possible trouble circulated around a limited cast of Myles and his scary brother Liam, Pierre Laprade and Stephen Playfair. Laprade was very smartly dressed (Sta-Prest trousers), his mother was French and her son was, as a result, not only good at French but sufficiently fluent to have a confrontation with Mr Snugs, the French teacher, standing up from his desk and calling him 'Snugsy'. That was the first time anyone had ever threatened a teacher's authority. Laprade was also one of the first people in my year to have sex. To prove it he brought a rubber johnny into class: used, knotted, squidgy with Anglo-French spunk.

The other rough boy was Stephen Playfair, whom I'd made attempts to befriend right at the start of school when he turned up for rugby wearing expensive George Best football boots with the purple sides and lace-less tops. We never quite became friends and, strangely, he was not part of the core group of football players who formed Cheltenham Whites. Unlike Laprade, who seemed perpetually dangerous, Playfair alternated between stretches of apparent harmlessness, crude boasting (about his 'six-incher') and clustered bouts of viciousness.

Within the overall dearth of trouble at school, different styles of fighting enjoyed peaks of popularity. Spectacularly demonstrated by Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* and David Carradine in the TV series (a kind of western-eastern), kung fu became a nationwide enthusiasm, displacing karate and judo as a semi-mystical practice enabling one to overcome massively superior odds by strict physical conditioning and enigmatic mental discipline. Since no one at school had any real inclination to acquire these skills – or even to find out where they might be learned – kung fu was translated and assimilated back into the traditional English sense of kicking, ideally while one's opponent was not looking, often while he was not even present. In the corridors and playground pupils could be seen crouching and then suddenly lashing out at an invisible enemy of thin air.

And then – appropriately, no one saw it coming – we suddenly shifted into the era of nutting. Talk which had previously been dominated by the intricate mysteries of kung fu was reduced to the crude reality of the head butt. This was in the fourth form and coincided, unfortunately for him, with the arrival of a kid from Yorkshire who was subject to the only campaign of bullying – mild, but concerted – that I can recall. The kid from Yorkshire had a Yorkshire accent and we ganged up against him because he was from Yorkshire. In a classroom after school we were all gathered round him in a partly threatening but mainly curious pack. Playfair was closest of all, his face six inches from the Yorkshire kid's. We all sensed that we might be on the brink of witnessing our first ever actual nutting, and the ironically named Playfair, to give him credit, did not disappoint. His head suddenly jutted forward into the Yorkshire kid's face. He'd done it, he'd only gone and nutted him! The Yorkshire kid's nose began to bleed. This could have been the prelude to further violence but it proved an end in itself. We dispersed soon afterwards, and the Yorkshire kid was OK – his nose wasn't broken. No one got into trouble and this little demonstration must have satisfied our curiosity about the cruel art of nutting because we didn't see – or even hear of – another instance. It's likely we were appalled, since the incident so obviously contravened any notion of a fair fight, in multiple ways. And it served as a kind of rite of initiation for the Yorkshire kid who, perhaps as a reward for not crying, ratting on Playfair, or retaliating – like a principled and bloodied civil-rights campaigner at a Woolworths lunch counter, he stood there and took his licks (lick singular, really) – was thereafter integrated into the ongoing not very rough and tumble of life at school.

Liam Lawless had enjoyed a long reign of scariness but the reputational fear he engendered was wiped out by an event that gained the status of instant myth when an officially sanctioned boxing match settled some kind of grudge between him and another boy in his year called Andy Craddock. There were actually two fights, both featuring Craddock, both refereed by the senior history teacher, Gimbert Campbell. When Craddock beat each of his opponents in turn, word of this unprecedented and unrepeatable event spread rapidly. I contributed to the spread myself though I witnessed neither the fights, nor the build-up to them (constructing the ring) nor aftermath (taking it apart); instead, as befits anything occurring in the realm of the mythic, I learned of it from several boys who'd heard about it from someone who did, who saw Craddock settle both of his opponents' hash. Did it really happen? I've no idea, but if it *didn't* then how real must the urge or need have been – of pupils and teachers alike – for it to have acquired precise and independently verifiable form like this? The 'fact' that the referee was a teacher of history added to its veracity, to its being a matter of record. No one, up until then, even knew there was a boxing ring at school, or that the parts from which one could be assembled were lying dormant in some deep recess of the gym, in the school's collective unconscious. This would have been in about 1972 or '3, when Craddock and Lawless were in the fifth form. If such a bout were arranged today the school would presumably be sued instantly by one or more of the belligerents' parents. Back then the fight was unannounced (if it had been included in the day's forthcoming attractions at assembly that morning *every* pupil in the school would have attended), extensively publicised after it happened *and* hushed up, further increasing the pace and intensity with which it was discussed. Whether or not it really took place, the boxing match was a dramatic and ritualised way of making plain that Lawlessness (as embodied by scar-faced Liam) would not be tolerated, would be suppressed not simply by the school authorities but by the citizenry itself (as embodied by Craddock who, in the sixth form, became a prefect).

Perhaps it was that match which inspired us to stage a boxing tournament in my back garden. There were four contestants: Myles, Nick Thomas, Mark Sanders and me. Mark was a bespectacled boy, always eager to join in, never quite accepted, and therefore easily persuaded to do things he might have been better advised to avoid. This willingness resulted in occasional triumphs. During a cricket match he was fielding on the boundary when the batsman walloped the ball in his direction. 'Catch it, Sanders!' we called out, knowing that, in his shoes, we'd have let the frightening ball fly past for a six. The ball was arcing through the air towards Sanders who, as ordered, stuck his hands in front of his face and caught it.

Everyone applauded, something Mark himself was unable to do for several days – he also had trouble holding a pen – until the swelling subsided.

The boxing tournament took the form of a round-robin; we would all fight each other for one three-minute round. There was no ring – or rather the ring was the entire lawn – and since we only had one pair of gloves it was agreed that you could only hit someone in the face with that gloved hand. We'd invited Sanders along because his was the face most likely to be hit. Surprisingly my dad sanctioned this competition, and Daryl – who had boxed in the army – came over to watch. Sanders got his nose bloodied by Myles and was also beaten, less dramatically, by me and by Nick. Myles and I both beat Nick so that left me and Myles to fight for the title. I was scared but managed, by using the full extent of the ring – backpedalling around the lawn – and never even attempting to throw a punch, to stop him landing one either.

Back at school there were only a couple of other fights that I actually witnessed. There was Alan Williams versus Myles: a furious floor-bound scrabble, self-extinguished by the unsustainable ferocity of the energy initially unleashed. And there was another with Paul Hynes of which I had a very good view – and a lasting memory – because I was the person fighting him. By some fluke I succeeded in pinning him down on the floor – I'd won, anyone could see that – but when I let go of one of his arms he punched me in the face, setting off a phase of nosebleeds which only came to an end more than a decade later, when I had my nose cauterised.

What all this indicates is how two aspects of the culture at large pulled us boys in opposing directions. Violence was cultivated, starting with the harmless punch-ups of westerns and continuing in escalating order of realism through to news footage of football hooliganism and atrocious stories of bovver which served as warnings and deterrents. Fighting was something to be aspired to – as much a part of the journey to manhood as O-levels – *and* avoided as a phenomenon of which one would in all probability be victim rather than beneficiary. However easily we talked the talk we had so little experience of where this fighting talk might lead that it served not as a conduit to but a satisfying and pleasant substitute for it. Fights *happened* but they never took hold; the daily life of school worked through a combination of civilised norms, underwritten, as in society at large, by deterrent and the threat of punishment.

This duality was embodied, perhaps not unusually, by the headmaster, Bernard Wilkinson, who invisibly inculcated the cultural restraint or ethical aversion to fighting, and Fred Jessop, the deputy head who policed the school with unflinching and always visible authority. He investigated and punished all infractions, however minor – at least it seemed that way – so that breaking any rule carried with it the near certainty of instant discovery and punishment. In an English class one afternoon someone threw a chocolate wrapper out of the window. It must have floated past the window of his office on the ground floor because Jessop came storming up in a double rage: the litter was bad enough but that meant someone had been *eating* in class. Littering would not be tolerated and eating in class would not be tolerated – that was the specific message; the larger one was that nothing else would be either.

While incidents of violence were almost non-existent there were cases of aberrant behaviour, individual and collective. A boy in our class was epileptic. In addition to making him prone to fits which, though expected, were never witnessed, this meant he was generally 'mental'. While it was never clear how this instability might manifest itself – there were rumours that he drank ink – we were always goading him towards some kind of breakdown or freak out. Our efforts were rewarded when, in the aftermath of some kind of fracas in class, he did indeed swallow a small amount of Parker's Quink. We were hoping this might be the prelude to a full-scale fit, whatever that might involve (blue frothing at the mouth?), but it turned out to be a disappointing end to itself.

Because of his convex cheeks Michael Cavanagh, one of the five of us who'd been called up for the football trial at Naunton Park, was called Pod. He hated this name as almost all the boys hated their nicknames. (I hated mine so much that I won't even repeat it here.) One morning a teacher failed to turn up for class and no substitute or prefect came to supervise us. Left to our own devices we mucked around as usual until, somehow, a chant began: 'Pod cheeks, cheeky pod! Pod cheeks, cheeky pod!' Soon everyone in the class except Pod, even his closest friends, were chanting as though to a derided god or in order to exorcise some malevolent spirit, though the real malevolence, as is always the case in these circumstances, was conjured into being by those doing the exorcising. 'Pod cheeks, cheeky pod! Pod cheeks, cheeky pod!' We were in perfect unison now, united in our trance-like power over Pod, who sat there, red-cheeked,

enduring this ceremonial humiliation. It was fantastic, we could have kept it going for ever if the teacher had not belatedly arrived to restore order, to pop this ballooning mania of persecution that had possessed us. If Pod had been black or Jewish it would have been a demonstration of how easily antisemitism and racism can rise to the surface, but the lesson was, if anything, more troubling than that: how a mass of people can turn on anyone, *not* for any reason, but for no reason at all. It could have been anyone on the receiving end of some cruelly customised variant of this chant and one of the incentives for keeping it going was, I suspect, from the excited relief that as long as Pod was the victim of this aural whupping, no one else was going to have to take his place. In the sixth form, Pod turned against me for no reason but it's possible that the memory of being burned at the chanted stake like this played a part in his need to take revenge on someone.

In the fourth form our Jehovah neighbours put their house up for sale. Despite my dad's suspicions (never entirely allayed) they had been lovely neighbours. We were sad to see them go – and anxious about who might be moving in. My dad was worried that it might be a black family. There were only a handful of black families in Cheltenham in the early 1970s, so this highly unlikely eventuality had probably been occasioned not by a sudden influx of migrants from the Caribbean to the Cotswolds but the arrival, in 1972, of the sitcom *Love Thy Neighbour*. His reasoning was simple: 'It would lower the value of the house.' My mum said she would have no objection at all if they were 'nice, refined people', unaware that while no one could have been nicer, *she* might have fallen short of other people's ideas of refinement. That's the ironic virtue of 'refinement'; appealed to as value or standard, it becomes instantly self-incriminating. My mum and dad had no *need* of refinement. Their values – absolute honesty, reliability, kindness – were enough.

My dad's preferred term for black people was 'darkies', offensive even then, but he was as incapable of using words like 'coon' (featured in every episode of *Till Death Us Do Part*) or 'nig-nog' (*Love Thy Neighbour*) as he was of saying 'shit'. And he always maintained that the treatment of Indians by some of his fellow soldiers on the subcontinent had been 'disgusting'. Tightness with money notwithstanding, he didn't have a mean bone in his body, though this didn't stop him being intensely xenophobic on a home-grown scale, as it were. He detested the Welsh on the entirely unreasonable grounds that they'd start singing if they were winning at rugby. I don't know what he had against the Scots beyond the fact that they were Scottish. Not that this meant the English were exempt from his suspicions. When I was sixteen I began seriously collecting the American superhero comics I'd bought randomly as a kid. I sold some of these, at a considerable profit, to a dealer who insisted that I post them to him before he sent the promised postal order so he could verify their condition. My dad was quietly angry and obviously worried because he thought I'd sold them to someone in Yorkshire, where people could not be trusted.

'He's in London,' I explained.

'They're even worse,' he said. I see this as the leftover of an attitude not only of local loyalty, but a way of living that pre-existed the easy availability of mass travel. Aside from India – an experience so extraordinary it could have no bearing on anything other than itself – his world did not extend beyond the immediate and he distrusted everything that lay beyond the known and familiar. Talking about road trips late in life, he said he 'liked the Oxford run': partly because it was manageable – forty miles up the A40 – but also because he had done it many times before.

Fears of the new neighbours proved unfounded: the Jehovahs were replaced by another nice family, the Meetens, with two kids (the daughter was in the sixth form at Pate's, the girls' equivalent of the grammar). All were happy for my dad to continue rotavating and growing vegetables in their garden. So everything continued as it had before.

All the LPs, rock and prog, meanwhile, had an effect on my reading. English teachers at any school are always trying to find ways to persuade indifferent pupils that books are not boring, and back in the early 1970s this meant science fiction. Specifically it meant Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which suffered from what in sci-fi is the insurmountable flaw of seeming old-fashioned. Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* featured a character called the Astronomer Royal who compared unfavourably with the eponymous heroes of *Chopper* and *Skinhead*. So the only real threat to Alistair MacLean, whom I'd started reading when I was twelve, was ... MacLean himself. After *Bear Island* (1971), which I borrowed from Hesters Way Public Library soon after publication, it was obvious that the relationship between the writer and reader had come to an end. I was too young to know why, had no critical discernment, but the *fact* of this termination makes

me wonder if I need to revise the date of those photographs of me in my bedroom. In the one of me and my mum there's a poster for *Bear Island*; would I still have had that on my wall if I'd grown out of MacLean (which I certainly had done by the time I was fifteen, let alone sixteen)? Perhaps I was younger than I claimed a few pages back.

Through Hawkwind and *Frendz* magazine I had become conscious of Robert Calvert, who had written the song 'Silver Machine', the 'Hawkwind Log' from *In Search of Space* and directed (whatever that meant) the *Space Ritual*. (The cover of the live album is propped up to my left in the same picture of my mum and me.) I read *about* Calvert in the *NME*, but the trail of stuff written by him led nowhere except to the 1974 concept album *Captain Lockheed and the Starfighters*, which I bought loyally and, after a few plays, wished I hadn't. Fortunately another Hawkwind associate was there to fill the post-MC (MacLean-Calvert) void. This established the template for my intellectual life before I knew that such things – templates, intellectual life – even existed. Scrutinising info buried in the recesses of *Space Ritual* it emerged that 'Sonic Attack' was written by someone called Michael Moorcock, whose 1969 sci-fi novel *The Black Corridor* was the source of the words intoned by Calvert on the song of that name. So I bought the book, a Mayflower paperback, and felt, for the first time, the scholar's satisfaction – the sense of home-coming – at discovering on the page the original from which a subsequent work had been derived. From there I moved on to Moorcock's sequence of novels featuring Dorian Hawkmoon – that first syllable announced some connection with the band – and then the Elric of Melniboné novels. 'Through the murky dusk a black shape moved. It was the sword, Stormbringer. Elric had called it.' I loved those lines in a way that – and I don't think I've passed a literary judgement with more certainty – had never happened to anyone reading a line of MacLean's. The feeling they induced – that shiver of silent excitement – was the first suggestion of what I would later learn is a common symptom of exposure to literature: an adolescent version of A. E. Housman's beard bristling as the line of remembered poetry flashed through him. I didn't realise that the Hawkmoon and Elric novels were part of a genre called 'sword and sorcery' or 'science fantasy', and since they remain the only novels in the genre that I have read I don't know how they stack up relative to the competition. There was an overlap with my Marvel-comic collecting when Elric guest-starred in a couple of issues (numbers 14 and 15) of *Conan the Barbarian*, based on the novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs (of Tarzan fame).^{*} They were drawn by Barry Smith, who could not stop Elric looking a bit daft with his ash-white face and red pointy hat, like someone wearing a costume at a fancy-dress party vaguely themed around Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

All of this attests to the swirl of prog rock, psychedelia, Victoriana (especially the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with their reheated medievalism), English arcadia and Arthurian legends (Excalibur, Merlin) whose psycho-geographical force field extended from Glastonbury to Sherwood Forest – which meant that Cheltenham (the town in general, my bedroom in particular) was at its epicentre.

Jeez, that picture of me and my mum in my bedroom is starting to assume the status of a Rosetta Stone (before it was adequately deciphered) because propped up on my bedside cabinet is issue 21 of *Conan the Barbarian*! I think what happened is that I bought that in real time, as it were, when it came out, and only acquired the Elric issues later, when I began retrospectively to fill in the gaps in what had become a collection but which had hitherto been an accumulation. If only there were a time-code stamped into the picture frame.

Actually, something else about the picture deserves closer attention. My parents had strict rules on home decoration. All walls were wallpapered and this wallpaper was then emulsioned over in magnolia. Only ever magnolia. Everywhere, throughout. Except my bedroom, my little fiefdom. I was allowed to choose the wallpaper, subject to budget, and, as you can see, I proved myself to be a talented, visionary, paradigm-shifting designer. The combination of orange-patterned wallpaper and knotted wood (also wallpaper) produced an interior completely different to anywhere else in the house. It didn't just look different. The whole vibe – not a word we used back then – was distinct: cosy, adolescent and, most importantly, *mine*.^{*}

When I was fifteen we went to Bournemouth for a summer holiday, booking into a bed and breakfast at the last minute. In the time I knew them this was the single most spontaneous and daring thing my parents ever did. They took a room hastily vacated by the owners, who were eager to maximise profit during the relatively brief spell of fine weather. I had my own room with a tiny bed which my parents asked me to make myself each morning – as they made theirs – in order to spare the nice girl employed as a maid. They were incapable, by nature, circumstances and habit, of being *served* in any way.

A northern family were staying at the same B&B as us. The parents were keen on watching a programme called *Shabby Tiger* on the TV in the lounge where my parents also spent their evenings. I got on very well

with their longish-haired son, who turned out to be an ideal holiday companion. He was slightly older than me and keen on getting a bit of what he called – it was a phrase I'd never heard – 'end practice'.

Each day we went to the beach, either with this other family or just the three of us, my mum always well covered, my dad in shirt-sleeves, long trousers and, in one wonderful photograph, relaxing in a deckchair wearing sunglasses, sports jacket and tie. While paddling in the sea I got talking to a girl in a bikini with shoulder-length brown hair. She was called Mandy, from Birmingham, was the same age as me, and we wandered off into the sand dunes up from the beach. We found a secluded spot and lay down and began kissing. She let me undo her bikini top and feel her tits. That evening her parents were going out and I went round to the room at her B&B, where we snogged on the bed. Mandy let me stick my fingers inside her and, shortly after, I was able, though fully clothed, to make myself come by grinding against her. Later in life this might have been considered a less than desirable outcome, but after half an hour I indicated to her that she could undo my jeans which she did, eagerly, and tugged at my dick, equally eagerly, till I came again, as eagerly as I had earlier. I had no idea if she wanted to come and, if she did, even less idea as to how this might be achieved.

We wrote to each other after we got back home, in the wake of what I see, in retrospect, was my first holiday romance. It had been so different to previous encounters, most of which had a quality of resistance overcome by negotiation and sleight of hand. Beyond what was strictly consensual – above the waist – it was understood that there would be a bit of a wrestle to get your hands where they wanted to be – below the waist – and where the girl didn't allow them to be. ('Wandering hand trouble' was assumed by girls to be an inherent characteristic of the adolescent male, like not washing properly.) As a result the main form of contact ended up being hand to hand or hand to arm. A degree of insistence was tolerated, expected even, but outright force was not. Cunning and subterfuge were OK, almost a form of seduction, whereas any kind of grabbing, wrenching or hurting was not. I'd never succeeded in getting my hands anywhere they were not ultimately permitted to be but they often ended up where they had, at the outset, been forbidden. With Mandy none of this previous experience or negotiating skill counted for anything – because they were unnecessary.

After an exchange of several letters and some juggling of dates, Mandy visited me in Cheltenham a couple of times, sleeping in the small spare bedroom. These visits – scheduled, she explained, so as to avoid her period – were even better than our afternoon and evening in Bournemouth. In the course of our various writhings in my bedroom – on the bed and the carpeted floor – while my parents were out of the house I became aware that I wanted to put not just my fingers inside her but my tongue, though this desire was at odds with all notions of hygiene. I think Mandy had similar doubts since while she was willing, if not eager, to take my prick in her mouth it did not occur to us to reciprocate these urges simultaneously. This ambivalent hesitation sounds quaint now but we had never heard of such goings-on, let alone seen them in photos or enacted on film. Our desires, which felt more like a form of intensely motivated curiosity, were entirely natural, unmediated, and while not perverse exactly, unencouraged by any context or cultural referents beyond the facts of our own bodies – though even the so-called facts of life did not cover these exigencies. Oh, and there was no question of 'going the whole way'; that was illegal, we were both terrified of pregnancy, and the inevitability of our doing it in the future served also to prevent it becoming a reality in the present. At some not very distant point in that future – more a slightly extended increment of the present, like injury time in a football match – she wrote to say that she had a new boyfriend and would not be coming to visit me again.

At school we took English language O-level a year early, at fifteen. I got a grade 1. The following year we did English literature O-level. The set-texts were the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, *Time and the Conways* by J. B. Priestley, and *Richard III*.

Briefly off-putting, the archaic or unusual nature of Shakespeare's language quickly became part of its allure. The way that I was so readily captivated – neither resistant nor begrudging – makes me wonder if some yearning for language, for a range of expression beyond the day-to-day run of things, was already there: incapable of being articulated but ready, like a sleeper cell, to be activated with a minimum of prompting. Almost all of our linguistic ingenuity at school was focused on invective and abuse. 'Oi, cunt-face!' we would call out to some kid who, when he turned round in response to this good-natured greeting, would be granted a suitable acknowledgement: 'Know your name, don't you?' So much of our social life was initiated with an exchange of unpleasanties – my early encounter with Myles Lawless conformed exactly to this convention – it required little to tilt that inventiveness and curiosity in the direction of the

rolling cadences and cascading imagery of Shakespeare (whose work is filled with ingenious if barely comprehensible insults and ‘counter-checks quarrelsome’, some of them poured onto the head of Gloucester by Margaret: ‘bottled spider, foul bunch-backed toad’). On the streets of London now, overhearing a gang of kids as they barge each other around on the pavement, you sense that same bottled, aggressively abbreviated linguistic energy. Put the two together – Shakespearean expansiveness and London guttural – and you have a kind of yob oratory, the volatile low-soar and high street-speak that fuelled Martin Amis’s prose. One of the dismal boozers frequented by John Self in *Money* is called, naturally, the Shakespeare. The irony is lost on him but there’s another instance, from real life, where high and low come together with conscious and deadly effect. After shooting dead a wounded Taliban fighter in Helmand in 2011, a British Marine followed up the execution with a terse farewell: ‘Shuffle off this mortal coil, you cunt.’ He shouldn’t have done it, of course, but there’s no doubt that in this extreme situation we are in the eddies of deep English. Shakespeare lives in that merciless valediction in a way that he often fails to in the iambic strut of Stratford or the Globe, where the actors always sound like they’re *quoting* Hamlet.

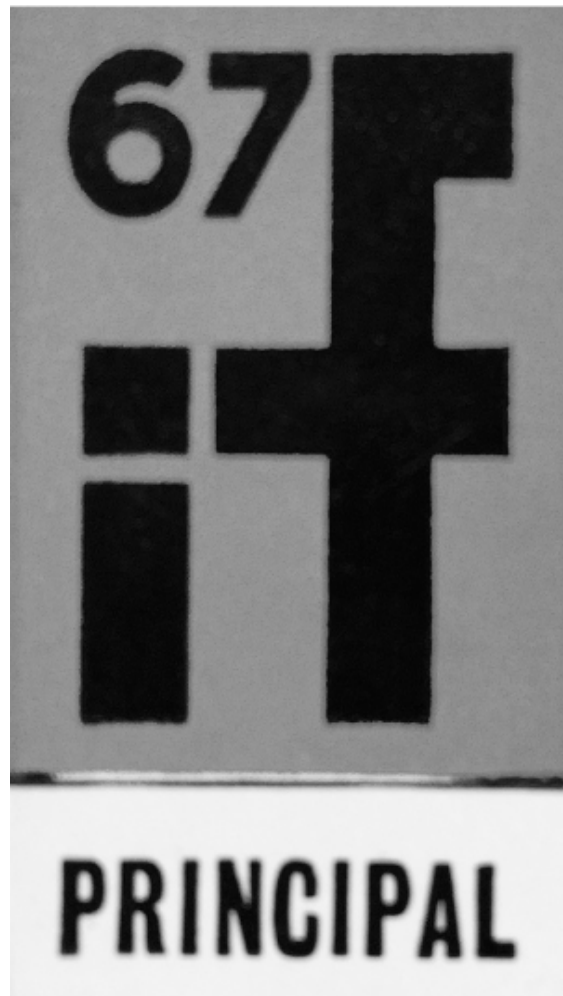
It wasn’t just the invective in *Richard III* – *Dick the Shit*, to us, naturally – that appealed. A *world* was beckoning. As is always the case in these situations, there was one teacher in particular, the head of English, Bob Beale, who was ready to devote all his energy – his life – to ushering us enthusiastically into this world. Passing the 11-plus was the most important event in my life; Bob was the most important influence. Until we studied *Richard III* at school Shakespeare played no part, had not even the slightest presence in our house or Yo’s across the road (where there were two battered paperbacks that I later came to recognise as serious: *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*).

As I took more interest in school work I began to watch edifying quiz shows on our colourful Trinitron. On one of these, *Ask the Family*, Robert Robinson asked contestants to identify the source of a quotation. ‘William the Bard!’ said the beaming mum. It wasn’t the way that she knew the answer that was striking; it was her familiarity and the *ease* of that familiarity. I had some books – the Moorcocks and MacLeans, *Ossie the Wizard* – but except for a few Second World War novels like the Corgi edition of *The Three They Couldn’t Kill* (‘heavy going’, according to my mum) and *The Incredible Journey* by Sheila Burnford, which she adored, the booklessness of my parents’ lives was complete. My dad was not just uninterested in reading; his refusal even to consider it as something to do was so steadfast as to seem almost principled.

Dorothy Franks, one of the cooks who worked with my mum at the Naunton Park canteen, was a lady who liked ‘culture’. When she heard that we were doing *Richard III* at school she lent me a recording of an abridged version of the play with either Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing in the title role. My motives for listening to this were frankly utilitarian: hearing rather than reading the words made them easier to memorise for exams, but I soon found that I was listening to the record far more often than I needed to, as if it were some weirdly extended, de-instrumentalised piece of prog. As a consequence I learned almost the whole play – as edited down to fit on two sides of an LP – by heart. I could recite the opening soliloquy for you now, minus whichever bits were cut, with the same emphases and intonations employed by the actor. The record had a green cover; beyond that I remember nothing about its physical appearance, can find no trace of it on the internet, so am unable to confirm whether the lead actor was Lee or Cushing. I wish I could track it down because no single object played a greater part in determining my future life than that album. It undoubtedly helped me get a grade 1 at O-level – a simple arithmetic was at work: the more you quoted the better the grade – but it was also like a sample from an ocean of language and literature stored and waiting for me in the paddling pool of my stereo. School work began to change from something that had to be done to being part of something that was not work at all, like listening to Van der Graaf or Hawkwind on that same stereo. For someone in troubled circumstances it – both that recording and reading generally – might have become an escape (from quarrelling parents, brothers involved in crime). For me the escape was not from poverty or circumstances and it wasn’t even an escape so much as an alternative to boredom and alone-ness. I use that ungainly term rather than loneliness because there wasn’t anything particularly lonely about my situation beyond the generic and isolating circumstance of having no brothers or sisters. So the new phenomenon of reading books was, in some ways, the latest increment of the old, long-established habit of solitary collecting: cards, Airfix soldiers and so on. The irony is that books would increase my alone-ness, separate me from my parents.

That LP, leant to my mum by a thoughtful co-worker in the canteen, is a reminder that while ‘culture’ was absent in my family – in the sense of works of an elevated value rather than the enacted values of community, a whole way of life – it was never far away, was often woven into the fabric of the lives of people who, economically and socially, were no different to my parents. One evening I watched a BBC *Play for Today* called *Shakespeare or Bust* about three northern miners who set off on a canal trip to see *Antony*

and *Cleopatra* in Stratford. As a result of various class-based mishaps and comic calamities they miss the performance altogether. By chance, though, they encounter the lead actors, Richard Johnson and Janet Suzman, who treat them to a private rendition of one of the key scenes from the play. Watching this play about Shakespeare on telly is like the pattern in the centre of the carpet of my mid- to late teens: the way that the things of quality I was being drawn to, becoming aware of, coexisted so easily alongside *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, *The Good Old Days*, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, *Love Thy Neighbour*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Top of the Pops* and, going further back, the Saturday afternoon wrestling (Brian Glover, the main actor in *Shakespeare or Bust*, was a former wrestler). It's not just that so much of society was geared to improvement; improvement was a part of how things *already were*.



When I was sixteen, I saw a film on telly that turned out be Lindsay Anderson's *If ...* The director's name – even the meaning of that job title – meant nothing to me but from the college and certain streets I recognised where it was set: right here in Cheltenham! So those mysterious badges that had circulated around my junior school ('67 If: Principal') must have been handed out during the film's production or release. At various points sneery-faced Malcolm McDowell listens to a piece of chanted music on the record player in his room at the famous public school.* The music recurs during another hypnotic sequence when he and a friend drive through lush green grass and trees with a local girl on a motorbike. I had never heard anything like this music and wrote to the BBC – without specifying either a person or a department – to ask about it. I received a letter back with all the information I needed and ordered the album, *Missa Luba*, from Boots. I cherish this quaintly diligent and minor fulfilment of the BBC's Reithian obligation to educate. It's just one track, 'Sanctus', that is used in the film. I can summon it up on Spotify and see the cover; am listening to it now as I listened to it in my room in the mid-70s, like Malcolm McDowell, on my stereo.

I can't remember whether that question about Shakespeare on *Ask the Family* was asked while I was doing O- or A-levels but ... Actually, let's revert to the quiz format and ask a question of our own. Earlier we spoke of an ocean of language, but moving on from that, which of the following metaphors is most appropriate: Shakespeare had got a foot in the door of the house where I lived? Or, a tiny amount of

Shakespeare had entered my bloodstream? Either way it was enough: the rest of his plays – first *Othello* and *Henry IV, Part 2* (A-level), then *Lear*, *Macbeth* and the rest – soon followed, along with poetry and fiction, to fill the shelves of my house (if we opt for the first metaphor); or had become part of the circulatory system of my consciousness (to elaborate slightly on the second). Taking our cue from Shakespeare, the choice of metaphors is redundant since in *Hamlet* he conflates the language of architecture and biology, the built and the corporeal: ‘the natural gates and alleys of the body’, ‘the porches of mine ears’.

It worked both ways. All the prog I was listening to got mixed into my education. Hawkwind had led to Moorcock, and Van der Graaf played a part in my O-level results. In my exam essay about *Time and the Conways* I quoted a line from ‘House With No Door’ – ‘... now nothing is revealed but time’ – as proof that Priestley and Peter Hammill shared the same ... Well, I’m not sure what they shared; what I do remember is that when I came across a copy of *Killers, Angels, Refugees* (Charisma Books, 80p), a collection of Peter’s lyrics and other writings – including a short story about a 17-year-old boy making model aeroplanes – I plucked it from the shelf as though it had been out of print for fifty years. This was in a newsagent’s, Martin’s, in Montpellier, where I’d gone to buy a can of Tizer after tennis: an example of the excellence of book distribution in the 1970s. At home I covered it in protective plastic and, half a century later, have it here in front of me as I write.

The thirsty reader will have been waiting and wondering, for a while now, when I was going to get my first taste of beer. It happened in the fifth form, in canned form at first. Chatter about beer had been building all the time at school. Some kids had drunk it, some had even drunk it in pubs, and some had been drunk on it. I’d been drunk too, on Strongbow, at my cousin Ann’s twenty-first birthday at the village hall in Shurdington. It was a new kind of fun, swaying all over the place and everything sort of swirling, but the swirling swirled into spinning and then I was spinning into the toilet and throwing up. Perhaps it was with this in mind – drinking was bound to happen, so best to try to introduce an element of moderation – that my mum bought a can of Long Life for me. She might also have had another precedent in mind. In the third form, when smoking was starting to happen at school, I’d urged my parents to let me try a cigarette. My mum smoked unfiltered Player’s but one evening round at Yo and Daryl’s, in their living room, someone – Daryl? – had a golden pack of Sovereigns which happened to be the favourite brand of the smokers at school, and it was agreed that I could have a drag. Which I did. And hated it. That was the only drag of a cigarette that I ever had. The surprising thing is not that I resisted the subsequent peer pressure at school; what’s strange is that I wanted even that one puff, since as well as hating my grandmother’s smoking I also hated everything about my mum’s smoking: the smell not just of the smoke but of her fingers, and the tobacco smell of the handbag that she carried cigarettes in, and the way she screwed up her eyes as she inhaled. (She was a modest smoker – four or five a day – but despite later incessant nagging from my dad and me she never stopped.) With that hastily abandoned introduction to smoking in mind, maybe my parents thought that I would react similarly to beer. It tasted strange, but it didn’t *revolt* me the way cigarettes did and gradually, like everyone else, I acquired a liking for this alien-tasting liquid and the effects it induced. Watney’s Red Barrel, Skol, Double Diamond, Long Life, Harp, Carling Black Label ... As my repertoire expanded I mounted a mental collection of the designs on the cans of the various brands I’d sampled but the big challenge – the big attraction – was to drink draught beer in a pub.

My best friend at this time was Steve Jones. He had brown hair and was thickset, his build enhanced by – and contributing to – his being a very good swimmer and water-polo player. This gave him plenty of opportunities to see girls in their swimwear at the pool which in turn resulted in a higher than average number of romantic interactions with them – not difficult since the average was close to zero. Steve and I had been friends off and on throughout school but became particularly close during O-level year. We had been in trouble with his parents before then by attempting to climb what we called ‘the north face’ of the wardrobe in his bedroom. His parents were furious because this hulking thing could have keeled over – a furnishing avalanche – and flattened us both. And now, several years later, in the fifth form, we mounted our riskiest expedition yet: we were going to have our first pint, at the Lansdown. We’d heard you could get served there but were still nervous as we stood outside, on the threshold of adulthood. We went in, walked up to the bar, were not told to leave. As agreed, Steve ordered two pints of Trophy, please. The barmaid did not ask how old we were. She reached for a glass and began filling it with the first of the requested pints, followed, moments later, by the second. Steve paid and we carried our pint pots to a vacant table, glowing with achievement. We had done it. We were in a pub, drinking pints of beer. Settled in our seats, we sipped our pints, wiped our lips, took in our surroundings.

The Lansdown was actually a hotel but the bar had nothing in common with the kind of cosy, dark, clandestine, after-hours places one associates with urban hotels. This was a large open area dominated by a full-sized snooker table and populated by students from the technical college. Sitting there talking was unlike all previous forms of conversation, by virtue of the fact that it was taking place in a pub, and the main topic of conversation was the experience of being in a pub, this pub. We hear a lot now about mindfulness and being in the moment; there have been very few moments when I've been more in the moment than in this pub moment – and the most wonderful thing about it was that in addition to being a good moment to be in, it was also a portal moment that would lead to ... other pub moments like this. Steve had bought the first round so when it was time for another I had to walk up to the bar and order on my own while he kept watch at our little table. I came back with two more pints, pints of beer-coloured beer in pint-sized pint glasses, saw Steve watching the snooker, looking as conspicuously relaxed as an escaped POW having a drink in a German beer cellar, trying not to attract attention.

After that first outing my pub life began in earnest. There were so many pubs and although we liked some more than others there were none that we disliked – except the ones where you couldn't get served. That was all that mattered: getting served, and as long as you could pass for a day over sixteen it turned out that most places were more than happy to oblige. The only thing we liked more than the word 'pub' was when it was followed by the word 'crawl'. A pub crawl was the ultimate form of social life, though we loved any pub we were in so much that it was difficult to muster up the willpower to crawl to the next one. Another disincentive was that all pubs, the one we were in and the ones we might move on to, suffered from the same glaring deficiency: a shortage of girls. In this respect life in a pub was no different to life outside it. Always that same unanswerable question: how to meet girls. The problem with pubs was the problem with girls; they didn't like them (pubs) as much as we did, didn't go to them nearly as much as we did, and didn't seem to like us as much we liked them (girls). And remember, it was the pub or bust back then. There were no alternatives: no cafés, no nightclubs (except in the form of the discos we went to after the pub for the simple reason that the pub had shut). Girls made up half the population of the world – except in Cheltenham where the figure seemed to have somehow dwindled to about ten per cent. Where *were* they?

Another problem with pubs, though it wasn't really a problem, was that some of them weren't very nice. Not that it mattered: they were still pubs. As an example of a pub that I went to a lot, with no redeeming qualities other than proximity to 1 Woodlands Road, I present to you ... *the Double Barrel*. It was just down the hill from our house, right across the road from the depressing stretch of shops where we'd vandalised the clock at the laundrette, a five-minute walk away and therefore significantly closer than the Shurdington Arms (unappealing) and the other boozers at the top end of Bath Road, notably the Exmouth Arms (nice beer garden) and the Five-Alls.

A more characterless boozer than the Double Barrel is hard to conceive. It fulfilled the basic definition of a pub in that it had chairs on which one sat and beer one could swill. Once, when I was four pints into an evening with friends from school, our next-door neighbour, Mr Meetens, came in for last orders. Wobbling up to him and slurring a few boozy words felt like the most grown-up thing I had ever done. I could look forward to a lifetime of this, a lifetime of boozy chat in boozers.

The other thing about pubs was that they were expensive and so, for the sake of economy, we'd also buy tins of beer and swill them down in my bedroom. I'm assuming that these were all terrible-tasting – entry-level beers for young or poor people who had no discernment, for whom the mere availability of this intoxicating and newly discovered stuff was all that was important. And maybe nothing has ever compared with those early pints – not the very first ones when it was necessary to add lime to help wash down the Carling Black Label, but the ones that were drunk soon after, when the taste was well on its way to being acquired. A childhood advert had claimed that 'Beer at home means Davenports'; in my teenage years it meant two of us sharing a seven-pint tin of Tartan or Worthington in my bedroom. How drunk did we get? Impossible to remember. And what did we do? Drank, listened to Tangerine Dream, Queen and Soft Machine on my stereo, talked, becoming more convinced with every exchange that drinking led to a form of revelation and truth-telling. * Whether at home or abroad – in the sense of out in the pubs of Cheltenham, in the Double Barrel, the Swan or the Cotswold – pissing it up like this was an ongoing process of trial and error, or just error and error. On a night out with Nick Thomas I drank so much Cinzano Bianco that my dad slept – in the sense of lay awake all night – in my bedroom in case I threw up in my sleep and drowned in my own vomit. I've puked up gallons of beer, multiple times, without ever losing the taste for it for more than a few days. With cider and Cinzano, though, the aversion has been intense – a mere whiff makes me

want to heave – and life-long.

By the time I went on holiday to Colwyn Bay with Steve Jones and his family – parents, aunt and uncle, sister and boyfriend – we were accomplished and confident pub-goers. Going to Colwyn Bay meant going to the pubs of Colwyn Bay. This was in the summer after O-levels, the very week our results were due. One night as Steve and I were walking back to the cottage his family had rented, we had a beer-fuelled, beer-related argument. Steve had a girlfriend at the time and I accused him of wanting to save money that could have been spent on beer in order to buy a present for this girlfriend. Without warning, he punched me in the face, cutting the inside of my beery mouth where it was mashed up against the fang that I'd given up trying to straighten out years earlier. It was a real haymaker but, because we didn't know what else to do, we continued walking home together while I spat blood and figured out how best to retaliate. As we walked I hung back slightly and picked up a stone. I said, 'Steve, let's not let this...' When he turned towards me I tried to smash him over the head with it. He ran off and I wandered round the town with my mouth all smashed up and bloody, ending up at the train station. After moping around there for a bit I eventually turned myself in at the cottage, where the Joneses were in quite a tizz over what had happened. The boyfriend of his sister, who was training to be a physiotherapist, was training to be a doctor. He said I should go to the hospital. I can't remember if we went to the hospital but I do remember that I didn't have stitches. With my tongue I can still feel a slight lump on the inside of my mouth, more than fifty years later.

Naturally the atmosphere was rather strained after this regrettable episode and became even more strained when we learned our O-level results: I had passed all of my mine with multiple grade 1s while his were woeful. Ha ha. I felt that even though I was the victim of an assault his entire family had turned against me. We drove back to Cheltenham, where I was reunited with my parents. The Joneses all came in for tea. When my mum asked, 'And he was no trouble?' they agreed that I wasn't, even though, what with the fight – i.e., getting punched in the gob by their halfwit son – and getting O-level results which made him look even more of a halfwit, I had been nothing *but* trouble. He stayed on for A-levels but, understandably, we were never friends again after the unpleasantness in Colwyn Bay.

In the lower sixth we were studying *Henry IV, Part 2* as one of our A-level texts. The play was being performed in Stratford and a trip was organised which served as a kind of inversion of *Shakespeare or Bust*. We travelled by coach, everyone was in a good mood, including Bob Beale, a keen bird-watcher, who explained that he always brought his binoculars to the theatre in case there was some good cleavage on stage. We arrived early and Bob, binoculars notwithstanding, turned a blind eye to the way that we all piled into the Dirty Duck before the play started. It was a warm evening and pinting away in the pub garden like this seemed the pinnacle of social life up to that point. By comparison the play was a bit boring and a fraction of the faction of us who had raced back to the Duck during the intermission stayed there without going back for the rest of the play. No one got into trouble.*

Saturday expeditions into the town centre had continued unchanged into the fifth form; shortly before the start of the sixth they'd taken what seemed like a turn for the worse. First they involved cycling rather than walking and second they started at 8.45 a.m. because my parents had insisted that I get a Saturday job.

My distinguished career in retail began at Fletcher's, a modelling shop, selling mainly Airfix kits but also American and Japanese brands besides. I worked on my own, in the basement, occasionally giving advice about paint and glue to customers who already knew more than I did. Mainly I just rang up sales on the till. When there were no customers I read novels until I heard footsteps tramping down the stairs and quickly shoved the book beneath the counter.

One of Bob Beale's qualities as a teacher was that as well as making the study of Shakespeare and the other set texts compelling, he converted many of us to the pleasures of recent-ish books: *A Farewell to Arms*, *Catch-22*, *On the Road*. So skulking down in the basement, furtively lost to Piers Paul Read's *The Upstart*, wasn't such a bad way to spend the day. Although the pay was poor – £2.50 for the day – it seemed like quite a lot. At the end of my second Saturday there was just time, on the way home, to stop at W. H. Smith's and buy a copy of *Close to the Edge*. My dad was appalled. The purpose of earning money was not to spend it but to save it, he said. But it was my money, I said, and I could do whatever I liked with it. He would have been on safer ground if he had argued that since I didn't even like Yes, I would have been

better off spending the money on a band I did like. Which I did the following week when I bought *Aqualung* by Jethro Tull.*

Coincidentally, Yes featured in another father-son conflict. Knowing that an entire episode of *The Old Grey Whistle Test* would be devoted to a concert by Yes and that this would be broadcast slightly later than usual, I put a note in the spice rack in our kitchen, weeks ahead of the broadcast date, to make sure that I'd be allowed to stay up and watch. On the very evening of the show my dad announced that it was too late, that I had to go to bed at the usual time. There was no negotiating with him. I don't think he understood the pain this caused me – I don't understand it either since Yes had, by then, slid even further down in my personal prog rankings than when I'd blown my wages on *Close to the Edge* – but I do understand the damage that was done. It was such an arbitrary stamping of authority that, beyond the immediate occasion, its main effect was to undermine the power that had been pointlessly exerted.

Aside from the freedom to waste my money however I saw fit, the job at Fletcher's had two further unexpected consequences. I had given up making Airfix models years earlier but as a result of the job and the discounts I became a born-again modeller, gluing and painting the parts more carefully than I had as a kid. (I still have the 1:32 scale SAS Jeep, manufactured by Tamiya.) As a result of getting a Saturday job I now had a hobby too, an increasingly expensive one it turned out, even with the discounts, so I began pilfering little pots of Humbrol paint and glue.

The other effect of the job took longer to declare itself. Janice, who had gone to Monkscroft School, worked upstairs on the ground floor, full time. (The top floor was given over to very expensive stuff – train sets and radio-controlled planes – but I can't remember what went on on the ground floor.) Janice had a feather cut, like Corinne, was tall with a handsome rather than beautiful face, and during my increasingly frequent forays up from the basement, on increasingly flimsy excuses, I found myself becoming increasingly reluctant to go back down there. As had happened with Shane I'd got to know a girl *accidentally*, as opposed to prowling around a disco, and became gradually attracted to her as a seamless extension of liking her.

When she left Fletcher's to work as a dental nurse we began to meet up outside of work. We snogged and made out in my bedroom and I started nudging her towards having sex. I also persuaded her to change the way she dressed, from secondary-modern style to something more grammar-school hippy. In winter this meant an Afghan coat, which suited her the way it suited everyone back then. One Wednesday afternoon, her day off, we agreed that we would have sex at my house while my mum was out at the canteen. But that morning the headmaster announced in assembly that there would be a special session devoted to filling out our UCCA forms and so I had to stay at school. When I got to Woodlands Road, Janice was standing on the street waiting for the bus, looking, if such a thing is possible, both extremely unhappy and somewhat relieved. By then, even if she'd been in the mood – and she definitely was not – we couldn't have had sex because my mum was due home at any moment. We postponed our assignation for a week and this too failed to go ahead as planned. I'd practised rolling on a rubber johnny in the bathroom; that hadn't been as easy as the instructions suggested (there was no mention of *pinching*) and now, when push came to shove, my dick wasn't anything like hard enough. Then, having gone along with my idea of getting an Afghan coat, Janice agreed to go on the pill. These cumulative delays meant we were getting more and more sexually involved and discovered, in the process, that we both enjoyed my licking her. So instead of the sudden life-altering transformation from virginity to non-virginity, it seemed that we ended up going all the way gradually, via something that was never mentioned as foreplay.

At school, meanwhile, another illicit activity followed a more predictable trajectory: playing cards for money. We started with Pontoon and Brag, with harmless amounts of money being won and lost. As we moved into a phase of escalating wins and losses, the first IOUs were issued. These handwritten scraps of paper then began circulating as an alternative currency (as happens in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, which I'd just started reading). Things got out of hand when we abandoned Pontoon and Brag for the simple and deceptively dangerous game of Acey-Deucey. With the amounts at stake suddenly beyond what anyone could afford, third-party IOUs could not be passed on, were no longer accepted. It all came to a head on the fateful day when Michael Dungey, holding an ace and a two, went for the pot (which had already reached 50p), got dealt an ace and was therefore hit for twice that amount. The news spread like wildfire: 'Dunj lost a quid!' It was the latest enactment of the timeless parable of the perils of gambling (which had recently been acted out on telly, in an episode of the second series of *Colditz*).

As with fainting and ouija-ing we never got caught gambling, but this high-stakes episode proved deterrent enough and we started doing other, more profitable, less losable things with our free periods and

breaks.

Mike Dungey's bad luck continued, though, deep into the sixth form when he and I were playing squash at the Old Pats Club. With its sweat-soaked towelling grip, my racquet flew out of my hand and hit him full in the mouth, knocking out his two front teeth.*

In the two downstairs rooms, in the hall and upstairs on the landing of Woodlands Road we had installed night-storage radiators – a form of heating that combined maximum ugliness with minimal heat production. The bricks inside the radiators heated up in the night – when electricity was cheap – and then gradually released this heat as they cooled down in the day. It was difficult to avoid the suspicion that while they were happy enough hoarding heat during the night they shared it with the rest of the house only begrudgingly. In the living room there was a real fireplace – never used – in front of which we placed an electric fire. That was an improvement, but the real gain was in the front room – as rarely used as its predecessor at Fairfield Walk – where the original fireplace had been completely covered up: proof that the backward, ashy world of real fires had been left behind. Naturally, this became the site for our best electric fire, with flame effects and wood surround, including two shelves, each about six inches wide, on either side.

These shelves were occupied by various ornaments, mainly brass. As with so many things in my parents' lives these ornaments, intended to be a source of decoration and therefore pleasure, served mainly to add to the endless round of chores, since they required cleaning with Brasso. It was as though my mum had fulfilled the intended destiny of her sister Hilda and had gone into service where such cleaning would have been part of her contractual duties, the difference being that here she worked for herself, a servant in her own house. On days when the brass was to be cleaned, all of it came out, from every nook and cupboard of the house, was cleaned on spread sheets of the *Daily Mirror*, and then put back in its place. Everything existed in order to be cleaned even though it was never really dirty. I had not heard the term 'pop art', but the red, white and blue can of Brasso was more pleasing to my eye, even then, than any of the objects it was used to clean.

On one of the shelves of the electric fire, in addition to the brass, there was a porcelain pony. Just before my seventeenth birthday, this pony, along with the brass knicky-knacky-knoos, fell victim to a cultural revolution as these useless items were replaced, by me, with something even more useless (since they didn't require cleaning): books. Looking back I see this as the first incursion into our home – into our sense of decoration – of a feature of middle-class life: the book as something not only to be used as tools to pass exams, to get an education, but as something to be displayed, to furnish a room. And as something potentially divisive. It was very different to the poem in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning discovers a stash of her father's books:

Books, books, books!
I had found the secret of a garret-room
Piled high with cases in my father's name;
Piled high, packed large ...

Tony Harrison alludes to this poem at the end of one of the sonnets from his sequence *The School of Eloquence*. After his mum has died, he and his dad sit on either side of a gas fire. He remembers her saying of them that they were 'like book ends, the pair of you': sitting, staring, saying nothing. That's exactly how he and his dad find themselves now that she's gone – 'the "scholar" me, you, worn out on poor pay' – united in grief, conscious that between them still are 'books, books, books'.

At the time of the purging of the fireside pony and brass I owned about thirty books. From these I carefully chose the most aesthetically appealing specimens to fill the total of approximately two feet of vacated shelf space. 'That summer', Harrison writes in another poem, 'it was Ibsen, Marx and Gide.' For my fireside makeover it was, I think, Dickens, Lawrence and Joyce (*Ulysses*, one of only two Penguin Modern Classics, along with Camus's *The Rebel* in the larger, so-called B-format). And while Harrison's dad responded to this European trio with one of his 'you-stuck-up-bugger looks' my parents were far more understanding. They allowed this programme of domestic glasnost to go ahead even while conscious that a new, possibly invasive species of decoration had been introduced into the household. It didn't last long, though, this attempt to gentrify our front room. After a couple of weeks I took the books back upstairs to the more accommodating shelves that my dad had built over my desk in my bedroom, and the pony and

brass were returned to their rightful places. I can't remember why, perhaps partly because we never used the front room, but mainly because it just didn't feel right. And so the separation of books from shared space was reinstated and the idea of books as the unique preserve and refuge of the only child was perpetuated.

That little fiefdom, my bedroom, was for a while the site of an aesthetic triangle comprising, in order of acquisition: Chelsea paraphernalia, psychedelic/prog rock posters/comics (as featured in the much-discussed pair of photographs) and books. This cultural trinity proved unstable as football faded from my life. I stopped playing, stopped following the results, and the Chelsea pennants and rosettes were consigned to a box in the attic. By the upper sixth it was just rock and literature, the overlap represented on the one side by books by Peter Hammill and Michael Moorcock, and on the other by the older Hawkwind and Roger Chapman posters contending for wall space with new ones of Virginia Woolf (whose books I hadn't read) and D. H. Lawrence. The Lawrence poster was part of a Penguin promotion on display at one of the bookshops in town. I'd asked if I could have it when they changed their display and after a few months it duly went from the wall of the shop to the wall of my increasingly bookish bedroom. Gradually all the prog stuff followed the Chelsea memorabilia to the attic so that the dominion of literature and books was complete.

My mum never became a reader but in addition to buying occasional tins of beer for me, she also started bringing home books. She had always enjoyed stopping off at the second-hand shops on Bath Road after work, looking for bargains, and she soon became adept at recognising the kind of books I might like. I've still got some of them: the first Nietzsche I ever owned: the Penguin Classics *Zarathustra*, in excellent condition, and, appropriately and movingly, an older, slightly battered orange Penguin paperback of Raymond Williams's novel *Border Country*.

While my mum confined her book-hunting to second-hand shops on the Bath Road, I ranged more widely. Well served by record shops in Cheltenham, we were if anything even better off when it came to books. Hancock's by the ABC was the best second-hand shop from which I used to buy and, on a few occasions, steal. Alan Hancock was involved with the Cheltenham Literature Festival: a distinguished, literary-looking man with white hair and beard, and glasses. Classical music was always playing on the stereo, the kind of music that, while written for the Viennese aristocracy and newly ascendant bourgeoisie, eventually found its natural home in – became the quiet and tacit universal anthem of – second-hand bookshops the world over.

Paperback Parade opened *after* I had become interested in books. I bought a lot of books there including an unusual silver Penguin with no information on the front or back cover: just the author's name and title: *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger.

Promenade Books, where I'd got the Lawrence poster, was a little like Driftin' in that you entered via a narrow staircase as if ascending to a daytime nightclub. It was a crowded, narrow-aisled place, memorable, for me, because of a book I'd bought there explaining the rules of hundreds of card games, including the multiple variations of poker. I set about learning as many of these games as I could, without playing most of them. Once I had mastered – in the sense of *got a vague idea of* – a given game, I put a red biro tick by its name in the table of contents. When I lost interest in this project after six months, having 'learned' about a third of the games, I took the book back to change it for something else. I knew it was a risk – I had a bag but no receipt – and stood anxiously and innocently while the assistant flicked through the book, which was in good condition except for the blatant markings. Which she didn't see. I made off, in exchange, with copies of *Jude the Obscure* and *Bleak House*.

I was not always so lucky. When I tried to take back another book – bought second-hand but in mint condition – I was told that I couldn't have bought it there. I didn't know how they knew this until I learned a little more about books and publishing. What gave the game away were the three letters on the spine and in the prelims standing for Book Club Associates, indicating that it was a cut-price edition available only to subscribers. That was an important lesson, though not quite the lesson it seemed. What I learned was that if you went about things subtly, politely and with apparent ignorance, claiming a given volume was an unwanted gift you *thought* had been purchased here because of the bag, your request might be declined – but you would not get into trouble. Oh, and never annotate in biro, only in pencil.

Scams aside, I want to give pride of place to Woolworths. As a kid, I'd regularly eaten beans and chips there with my mum in the cafeteria; as a sixth-former it's where I bought *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. I still have that same copy (still haven't read it) and many of the other Penguin Modern Classics that I found there.

Impressive though it was, my mum's ability to find books for me was made simpler by Penguin's

domination of the 'classics' market. There were three kinds of Penguin Classic: orange spines for the English Library, black for Classics and grey-green for Modern Classics. These editions marked the point where school work – books you had to read – merged into stuff you wanted to read, where exams gave way to education, obligation to pleasure. Conrad's *The Secret Agent* was an A-level set text, but it was also a Modern Classic, like *Le Grand Meaulnes* or *On the Road* (both Woolworths purchases).

Just as school work merged into pleasure, so reading literature in these editions doubled as a training in visual art. I saw my first ever Edward Hopper – or a detail of one, showing a couple sitting in fold-up chairs, staring into a radioactive sky – on the cover of *One* by David Karp. Same with de Chirico (a detail from *Enigma of the Hour* on Franz Kafka's *The Castle*). From an early stage I began to notice that paintings by the same artist cropped up on different books by the same author. Quite reasonably Vanessa Bell (whose name meant nothing to me) provided portraits for both *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*. Or, more elusively, different authors were brought associatively together by similar-looking paintings: Victorian streets at twilight; the amber-lit windows of homes visible through the bare branches of trees; shop windows reflected in rain-slick streets; solitary strollers; moonlight, tattered clouds, turquoise-y sky; an atmosphere, always, of mystery, elegy and lingering anticipation. First encountered on *The Secret Agent*, variations of these scenes also turned up on the covers of *The Woman in White*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *The Turn of the Screw*. The reason they looked so similar is because the paintings were all by the same artist, Atkinson Grimshaw. But his was not the most consistently important name in this little journey of artistic discovery. On the back covers, information about painting and artist was often preceded by the words 'The cover designed by Germano Facetti...'. Germano Facetti! This foreign-sounding name might as well be rendered into its English equivalent by the two words 'Art History'.

Since these early discoveries the happiest moments in fifty years of museum-going have occurred when I've seen Penguin Modern Classic paintings on a gallery wall, especially since the cover often showed only a detail of the original. Seeing the works themselves revealed exactly what had been lost, though I tend to see it the other way around, with the painting an expanded version of the Penguin original. Actually, that's not quite true, I've jumped a stage in this process of cognition and recognition. The supreme pleasure was – and still is – spotting in a gallery a painting from a Penguin Modern Classic that I'd glimpsed for the very first time as an Athena poster in that shop on the Promenade.

Aside from all those Grimshaws my favourite Modern Classic cover was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Southern Mail / Night Flight*, which showed a biplane diving through a turbulent dark sky. When I finally caught up with the painting – C. R. W. Nevinson's *Swooping Down on a Hostile Plane* – in the Imperial War Museum in London in the 1990s, it felt like the fulfilment of an accidental twenty-year pilgrimage. All that had been excluded by the crop was the hostile speck of the enemy plane on which the Penguin one was swooping. I may have been new to the history of art (so new that I didn't even know that there was such a discipline) when I bought the book but I already knew enough about the history of aviation – Airfix history, I mean – to see that this plane was a British Sopwith Camel which, strictly speaking, was misleading since the aircraft in both novellas were civilian and French.

Back in the real world of modelling, at Fletcher's, it was decided that they had no further need for me. There was something appropriate about this. The father had been made redundant from Gloster Aircraft Company and now the son had been let go from the place that sold models of the planes that had been made there. I got another Saturday job at a shop called Piccadilly, the first of three jobs selling men's clothing. On the first day two things happened: I was reunited with Mark Harwood's ancient-looking mum, now a senior sales assistant, and I was asked to contribute to a birthday present for Jane, the cashier with lovely waist-length hair – 50p: a fifth of my earnings. When I told my dad he was so outraged that he gave me 50p in compensation, out of his own pocket.

The headquarters and flagship store of Piccadilly was in Birmingham. Every other Saturday a surprisingly shabby older man from the city would come down to help out and, presumably, keep an eye on us. One day Mr Prince, the suave youngish manager, said of him: 'That man has no sophistication whatsoever.' Perhaps because word of his snooty attitude had got back to Birmingham HQ, Mr Prince left and was replaced by a new manager who, though less sophisticated, was homosexual. From this point on the job became a lot of fun, partly because we were joined by another full-time staff member: a thickset boy from Rowanfield – a rough sec mod – with thick glasses and curly hair who was always getting into fights. On the first day he told me he had recently broken someone's jaw. Fortunately he seemed to leave this aggressive part of his personality behind when he came to work, or at least it was manifested only through stories (confirmed, in

one instance, by a report from the magistrate's court in the *Gloucestershire Echo*) rather than behaviour. The combination of gay manager, gorgeous Jane – what must it be like, I kept wondering, to wake up in bed with her and all that hair next to you? – violent yobbo, Mrs Harwood, and, on Saturdays, me, turned the shop into a kind of sitcom.

I had stolen occasional pots of Humbrol paint from Fletcher's but now I stole underwear. I'd take a packet into the toilet, discard the wrapping, and wear them home over the pair I'd come to work in.

When that job came to an end I moved on to Burton's (no fun at all) and, finally, to an upmarket boutique on the Promenade.

All of this was going on during a phase of driving lessons within the Dyer household. First up was my mum, who failed her test twice and was allowed to pass, third time around, with the proviso that she was 'very careful'. Everything about this – the undertaking itself and the qualified pass – was strange. Having never expressed any desire to drive, suddenly she was blowing money on lessons. The reason for this, she said, was to prove wrong someone who'd said she would never be able to drive. Although the identity of this nay-sayer has never been revealed it can only have been my dad – who was proved right, as it turns out, since after passing her test she never again even sat in the driving seat. I passed second time around which meant that Janice and I could start going out to country pubs: a nice thing to do that was also a sign of how little there was to do. We were both seventeen but as we sat sipping in the garden of the Frogmill or the Apple Tree in Woodmancote we could have been in our seventies.

Not that it lasted long, this interlude of bucolic motoring. Janice and I split up and soon there was even less going on in my actual life than there was in the teeming worlds of Dickens's London and the wilds of Hardy's Wessex.

There was drama at home, though, iterations of the usual adolescent– parent conflict, often arising from insignificant beginnings. Midway into an argument my dad said that my heroes were 'the bloomin' Hells Angels'. (Even in the heat of the moment, he avoided swearing.) This was so obviously not true that what had been a low-key argument boiled over into a ferocious row. Sometimes confrontations like this became physical – I was always the instigator and they always seemed to take place in the impossibly cramped confines of the kitchen. When my mum tried to intercede in one of these scuffles my dad accidentally elbowed her in the nose. 'That's me nose gone!' she said, a remark so idiotic that I became incandescent with rage. After things had simmered down she delivered a rousing speech about how she would always put herself in harm's way to come between father and son. That set me off again. I responded with a speech of my own, a rant about how everything she said sounded like something she'd heard on television.

Actually, not all the bust-ups took place in the kitchen. A particularly silly one took place in the bathroom after we'd had a shower fitted over the bath. This was such a major source of excitement that when it was finally ready for use the debut shower was deemed a spectator-worthy event. I'd bravely stepped up to test the waters while my parents hovered around the bathroom door. My mum asked if they could watch me experience this incredible thing: a shower.

'No,' I said.

'You can keep your underpants on,' she said, whereupon I slammed the door on the pair of them, effectively ruining the grand ceremonial opening of the shower.

That was a one-off incident but there were other persistent sources of tension. One of these was my mum's coughing. I was always on at her to stop smoking but she claimed that the cough had nothing to do with cigarettes. It was, she insisted, *me* that made her cough.

'It's a nerve cough,' she said.

'A *nerve* cough?'

'You make me nervous.' Maybe I did, but the idea that this could produce a cough was so ridiculous that a cough-punctuated quarrel was soon in progress. I was causing a lot of trouble, obviously; what's less obvious or at least harder to explain is why I was so easily provoked by my parents. Even my mum's frequently aired lament and concession – 'We're all that's wrong,' she'd say to my dad, mid-row, hoping that this anodyne might broaden the particular quarrel into non-existence – had the capacity to inflame rather than soothe, thereby proving that in the process of being wrong she was also right.

In an effort to understand and prevent these outbursts my parents kept threatening to go to see Bob Beale and tell him about the trouble I was causing. Knowing how much they valued their privacy I knew they never would. Then, after one particularly heated bust-up, they did. In the sense that they got dressed up,

left the house and drove off in the car. I don't know where they went but I was sure they wouldn't have gone to Bob's. Probably they just drove around for an hour during which time I barricaded myself in the house. They got home to find the front door locked. And the back door. And the conservatory door. All the windows were fastened too. I'd even removed the key that was always kept under the cardboard on the drum by the hedge near the conservatory. I could see them from various upstairs windows as they tried all these options. Whatever they thought of doing had already been anticipated and steps taken to guard against. I had effectively taken myself hostage and, in keeping with the template of hostage negotiation, their next step was to go over the road to the call box and ring the house. The first sticking point was getting them to tell if they had gone to Mr Beale's. This went on for quite a while. They said they had, then admitted they hadn't and then – the line went dead. Because, my dad said when he came back into the garden and called up to the bedroom window, they had run out of change. In a real hostage situation, after I opened the window and stuck my head out to resume negotiations I'd have been in the snipers' line of fire, but in this instance it proved that I held all the cards. It wasn't just that the cards, in this case, were keys. My parents rarely went out, they loved being at home, so not being able to get in it left them in a disorientated even desperate state of which I took full advantage. If I let them in they had to agree that there would be no reprisals or retroactive punishments. If ... In a domestic setting I was recreating a low-budget version of the rebellion at the end of that film *If...*! After a while I let them in. They kept their word, quite literally since for the next several days not a word was spoken.

First it had been a Saturday job; now, in the summer between lower and upper sixth, my parents said that I had to get a full-time job, to bring some money into the house. Through the grapevine they heard that there was a job going at the dairy on Leckhampton Lane. Remember: I'd needed a note from my mum to excuse me from the obligatory mid-morning, state-sponsored bottle of cheesy milk at Naunton Park. So this dairy – a place of cows and cow shit, of milk and milk churns and milk products – was a site of milky horror, but I 'applied' for a position there and turned up for an interview as though I was Geoff of the fucking d'Urbervilles. My parents insisted on this not as a punishment or an attempt to instil character; it seemed, to them, a natural place to work – as it was, especially for my mum who had been brought up to milk cows. I had not been brought up to be anything but I had become very good at school work and loved reading. In spite of this I was offered the dreadful job on the spot. It was never made clear if my parents would force me to work there because, the very next day, I heard of another job at Terry Warner's Sports, just a few doors down from Dave Courtney's. Consolidating my experience in the realm of retail, I started work there the following week.

By the time school resumed I had drifted into becoming a different person. I was still keen to go drinking, at pubs and at the Pavilion Club, a music venue that had sprung up right next to the tennis courts in Montpellier, at discos, or anywhere else for that matter. Every part of the culture was designed to put beer-drinking at the centre, the belly, of one's manhood and life. TV, films, adverts – everything involved drinking. Even the bad parts exercised a powerful attraction. Before an English class one Monday a new boy who'd joined the school in the upper sixth said he'd been out at the Pavilion with Ian Allen on Saturday night and, as a result, had been 'hungover all the next day'. I didn't just lament the missed night out; I envied the lost Sunday. I too craved hangovers, proof that the weekend had been well spent rather than wasted. In town or in pubs, men with huge guts were almost role models, sporting physiques which if not desirable in themselves deserved respect as the physical manifestations of dedication to the vocation of beer-drinking.

All of this was consistent with the boozy trajectory established in the fifth form, but by now – the upper sixth – something else, equally powerful and no less enduring, was in the process of establishing itself. Socially my skills were limited to the pub and, at discos, to a few slurry chat-up lines, but my understanding of gestures, girls, psychology – *everything* – was far in advance of my lived experience because of all the novels I was reading. I'd had a growth spurt when I was fourteen or fifteen, was already six foot. While the feeling of something happening to my mind, of mental growth, was as perceptible (to me) as the physical sensation of having become ganglingly tall, the only available measure was the marks I was getting at school, for my homework. It may not have been apparent – or of interest – to the handful of girls from Pate's who had come to the boys' school in the sixth form but I was conscious of an extra range and degree of responsiveness to the world. That world was as limited as ever; outside the strict requirements of school

work this responsiveness was impossible to articulate except through the words of others, through the books I was reading, the passages I was learning off by heart. And so the desire to read more, to make more of these words my own (whether they were by Hardy, Shakespeare, Lawrence or whoever) increased constantly – as did my understanding, if not of the world then at least my little part of it. Socially I was still restricted to pub life, to the etiquette of round-buying, but I was becoming mentally articulate even as I lacked the means to express this fluency.

I'd been unsure, right up to the last minute, which A-levels to do: English, obviously, and possibly French and History. My dad counselled against History because it was 'all in the past', one of two wonderful bits of advice from him ('Never put anything in writing,' was another). Almost arbitrarily, I'd opted for Economics and Geography. I was getting top marks in all these subjects, had no doubt that I wanted to go on to do English at university, but had found it difficult to decide where, partly because the prospectuses made everywhere sound great. I'd put UEA, Southampton, Leeds and a couple of other places on my UCCA form; I visited Leeds and Southampton on the train, but getting to UEA on the outskirts of Norwich for the open day and interview was going to be difficult. All applicants had been sent a list of B&Bs so we could stay the night ahead of this important day, but my dad was so horrified by the combined expense – train *and* lodging – that he decided we would drive there and back in a day. We set off at six a.m. and got there for the advertised start time. My interview, with someone whose name meant nothing to me, was scheduled for the afternoon. Midway through this interview our conversation turned to John Fowles. I had read *The Magus* which was impressive in itself (my having read it, I mean), but foolishly I felt the need to embellish this achievement by saying that I had also read *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, even though Bob had warned us all never to claim to have read *anything* we hadn't. When the professor asked what I thought of it I mumbled something about needing to read it again – what did he think? He replied, unhesitatingly, that it was a great book, that in years to come Fowles would be recognised as a writer of the status of Conrad. We had done *The Secret Agent* for A-level in the lower sixth and I was glad to be back on safer, curricular ground again. But the professor hadn't finished with Fowles. It was a shame, he said, that Fowles was spending his time rewriting *The Magus* rather than working on something new. I agreed.

While I was at the interview and attending various talks about the university, my dad was sleeping in the car in the UEA car park. He could have driven to a café but preferred vegetable soup from one flask – together with slices of bread and butter – and tea from another, in the car. I found him there, in the car, in the car park, and we set off for Cheltenham. I had lots to tell him. It's often easier to communicate what is important in a forward-facing situation such as a car journey than looking into someone's eyes across a table, but already, by now, there was an awareness that the things that were most important to me could not be communicated to my dad. It wasn't just me. We both shared this consciousness and so at some level, as we drove, we *were* able to communicate something important, so important that it would come to define our relationship more and more completely. For now, there was the drive to concentrate on.

'I'm really struggling,' my dad said by the time we got to Kettering, but he kept his shoulder metaphorically to the wheel, motored on through the dark heart of England and got us safely back home, where my mum had been waiting as anxiously as if we were a two-man bomber crew who had earlier taken off from an airstrip in Norfolk. It had been a journey of epic tedium – 400 miles, lasting nine hours, not counting the four hours of overtime my dad had spent in the car park – featuring more roundabouts than I had ever seen in my life. So it was no surprise when, the following morning, my dad woke to find that his neck had been so severely cricked that he could barely move his head.

When I debriefed Bob Beale about the visit (which involved his debriefing me) he explained that the professor who had interviewed me was Malcolm Bradbury, author of *The History Man*. I read it the following week and everything turned out OK: I got an offer of two Bs and a C.

Trouble, meanwhile, was always lurking, on the walk home from pubs or from the Night Owl. Or *at* the Night Owl. Recently, in Stavanger, Norway, at the end of a long evening's drinking in a wonderful bar, my companions said they were going on to a nightclub. I didn't join them because I was drunk and because the promised music didn't sound like my kind of thing. To my Norwegian friends these objections made no sense. The music was irrelevant as nightclub meant 'place to get even more hammered than you are already'. That's what the Night Owl was back in the mid-70s. I never climbed the dark, narrow stairs before I'd already had at least the first part of what would turn into a total skinful. There was some dancing but really it was just a place to continue drinking as long as possible with the added incentive of girls (who had been largely absent during the preceding shift in the pub).*

One night I was with a friend called Chris who was back from Reading University for the holidays, and a friend of his called Clare, also from Reading, who had come to visit. Some kind of low-grade altercation took place between Chris and a girl who claimed she knew the manager of the club. It all died down, to the satisfaction of everyone concerned – except Clare who, after an intermission of further drinking, dared Chris to go back to the girl and say, ‘Where’s the bloody fucking manager then?’ He gallantly took up the challenge, which succeeded instantly in its real if unstated purpose of provocative reignition. Chris became involved in a scuffle with the girl’s boyfriend, after which we were ejected. We were lucky, I suppose, that this boyfriend was not also thrown out since if the fight had spilled out into the street someone – Chris, me – might have got hurt. As it was, the *potential* for trouble – harmless trouble – had merely added to the fun of the night.

There was also an inexplicable threat of trouble from a familiar and therefore unexpected quarter. The oddly named Richard Nutter, with whom I’d gone to my – our – first ever gig (Family at Oxford) turned on me for no reason at all, though this was part of a more general turn for the worse. He’d left school after O-levels, had become a kind of greasy-haired leather-jacketed biker. At a harmless disco at a church hall in Leckhampton, a friend told me that Richard, having shown him the knife he used to break open cigarette machines, said he was going to teach me a lesson later. We hadn’t fallen out; he just had it in for me. And the thing about all lessons like these is that it’s worth going to considerable lengths to avoid whatever it is you’re supposed to learn from them. So when it was time to leave my friend and I swapped jackets so that I could sneak away in disguise, unseen, unharmed and unlearned. Within two minutes of leaving who should I bump into but the Nutter himself.

‘Hi, Rich,’ I said. If I’d had the presence of mind to smarm up to him a bit more I might have said, ‘What a coincidence! I was just thinking about you, about that time we went to see Family. Do you still listen to them much? No, right, me neither but once you’ve experienced something like that together there’s a bond that can never be undone, don’t you think?’ I was too frightened to say anything like this and perhaps the manifestation of that fear was enough to satisfy him. He stood there for a bit with his axle-grease hair and his Ramones jacket (which, back then, was not called a Ramones jacket) but showed no signs of wanting to harm or even detain me, so I continued on my way, vaguely alert, as one always was back then, to any other threats that might be encountered between Leckhampton and Woodlands Road.

At another woeful disco I met a girl called Gill who was at Pate’s. She was a year younger than me, more obviously compatible than Janice with the now thoroughly bookish me. There was nothing remarkable about the relationship; only its *circumstances* are relevant to this account.

We had sex at my house and hers (while our parents were out) but also, often, after dark, in my dad’s car in the empty car park of the tech college. This wasn’t some kind of lovers’ lane – a known place where you could come to have sex – it was just a deserted car park. Ours was usually the only car there. We were never disturbed, never wiped away the steam on the windows to see another car or someone who had been spying on us – there was always just the empty car park and surrounding trees, lurching into light as we switched on the engine and drove out.

Our house at the corner of Woodlands Road was about 200 yards beyond the ‘Welcome to Cheltenham’ sign on the Shurdington Road. Now it’s been enclosed by further suburban estates. And that no man’s land between our house and the looping road called the Park where so much happened – first kiss with Shane, fight, lots of tennis, and then sex in a car – has been infilled with an upmarket housing estate, the first parts of which were under construction when I was in my early teens. The track from St Michaels Road has been paved over and opens up into the cul-de-sac of the estate’s private road. All of this looks like it’s always been there; it’s almost impossible to reimpose the co-ordinates of what was there before – by which, really, I mean what *wasn’t* there – on what has been built over it, taken its place. Which makes me more, not less conscious of the loss of that anything-goes, hemmed-in, undeveloped, not-quite wilderness. My teens would have been *impossible* without it.

I was reading so much that my dad said I should give my eyes a rest. Bob Beale said I should try for Oxford. When I relayed this news to my parents it meant both a lot and, at the same time, less than the 11-plus which had such a clear status within the realm of their expectations and hopes. For them Oxford was one of two rows of brainy students quizzed by Bamber Gascoigne on *University Challenge*. To me it meant that I started working even harder, reading even more. Staying on to take the Oxford entrance exam was

conditional on getting three grade As at A-level. I'd passed the 11-plus almost accidentally, but I knew absolutely that I wanted to get top A-level grades. Even so there was nothing self-determining – let alone self-made – about this. I don't have the figures but I'd guess that seventy per cent of pupils at my grammar school stayed on for A-levels, a high percentage of these went to university, and each year several went to Oxford or Cambridge. Once you were in, at the age of eleven, you were in, and on your way. So I was riding a tried and tested, reliably functioning educational escalator that had been constructed for me – and it was *free*.

I did the exams, they seemed to go well. School came to an end but maybe it hadn't – if I got the grades I'd be back for the seventh-term Oxford exam. The heatwave summer continued. In London this was the summer of punk; in Cheltenham it meant drinking, going to country pubs, splitting up with my new girlfriend, and playing badminton in our garden, this time using proper racquets, with my mum and me on one side, Daryl and my dad on the other, handicapped by the declining sun in their eyes. Life was going on but it was really in a state of suspension. Anything happening was irrelevant compared with waiting to hear about my A-levels.

I was the first one up on the morning a letter arrived with the results. I tore it open and went up to tell my parents. Three As.

For the new term there was a huge amount to read. I'd begun working at another job at an upmarket clothes shop on the Promenade, but when the results came in I asked my parents if I could quit to do school work. They agreed but not without pressing the claim that other parents would not let their son have this opportunity; other parents – that same old tune – would insist their children brought money into the house. This resulted in another furious row because they didn't mean what they were saying; they were quoting from an unread script. A scenario like this might have been enacted in some TV series set in a mining town in the Great Depression, but in this case it was nonsense. There *were* no 'other parents' like these other parents. Any parents we knew would have been like them: bursting with pride at the barely comprehensible possibility of a son going to Oxford. And that, I see now, is what they were really saying, what these rows were really about. We were living through something we didn't understand, of which no one had any experience – and this was *part* of the experience. *Look Back in Anger* was an A-level set text (which now reads more like a misogynist's handbook) and I was reading about related situations in *Sons and Lovers* or *Saville* by David Storey; my parents had nothing to draw on except an idea of the past which was also a projected sense of loss to come. And they were right.

In September of that year, 1976, we went back to Shropshire for my grandad's funeral. While he was staying with Rene for the second time he'd walked in front of a bus and injured his shoulder. In hospital he climbed on a chair, clambered over a balcony and fell to his death.

It was a sad end to the sad phase of his life that had begun after my grandmother's death. I'd read *King Lear* by then so the way he was always shuffling between his daughters' houses acquired a kind of tragic dimension – except it didn't really. It was another instance of the way stuff I was learning at school infiltrated and tinted domestic life: a shifting relationship that was at times compatible and illuminating, and, at others, incompatible and distorting. Hilda, the one daughter he didn't live with, was no Cordelia, but Rene assumed the roles of both Goneril and Regan: a pelican daughter, viewed with righteous disdain by the other three.* After my grandad's funeral I typed up some lines from *Lear* and sellotaped them to a couple of photos of him: 'The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long,' and 'I am a very foolish, fond old man ... and to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind.' I showed these captioned pictures to my mum, who said they were lovely, but I had the first inkling of something that became stronger later: that a learned tribute like this, while heartfelt, was also *inappropriate*.

I had the same feeling, but far stronger, excruciatingly so, when I showed my dad one of the stories I had written. What was the point of showing these things to him? Well, he was my dad, as Martin might have said of Kingsley. I felt embarrassed almost as soon as he started reading and, to his relief as well as mine, snatched it back – handwritten, on one of the foolscap pads he'd nicked from work – before he'd got to the end of the first page. My increasing sense of this – of part of my life being incommunicable – consolidated the habit of communicating less and less of what was important to my parents. We could still speak but the main thing I wanted to communicate was precisely this richly populated sense of how much could not be said.

I took the Oxford exam, then travelled by coach, forty miles up the A40, for an interview at Corpus Christi

College. Some of the first-year English undergrads at Corpus invited the visiting interviewees for a get-together, telling us all about the intimidating and inspiring brilliance of our prospective tutor. After that a bunch of us went to the Bear, where I got optimistically drunk with the candidate I was sharing a room with. I also found myself chatting to someone interviewing for a place at Christ Church: the first time in my life I'd ever met anyone from Cheltenham College. My interview the following day seemed to go OK and then I walked around the damp streets for a while, stopping at the Bodleian and Blackwell's, looking in at some of the other colleges. All I could think, every moment I was there, was how badly I wanted to be coming back, to be a proper student here.

In Cheltenham I resumed the passive life of actively waiting for a letter to arrive. The A-level results had come exactly on time but this was December, the time of the Christmas post: that cheerful, readily accepted explanation of delay that also serves as such a useful diagnosis of a nation's generic failings that it could be extended beyond December to cover the rest of the year. We're sorry that no one has answered your call to British Airways; this is due to the Christmas post. The train now standing at platform 6 has been delayed due to the Christmas post. Eventually I could bear it no longer. I called the college office and was told that I had got a place. This was at about four in the afternoon. Ten minutes later my mum came home from the canteen, pushing her bike along the narrow path outside the kitchen window. She looked up to see me strutting back and forth in the kitchen, brightly lit, pumping my arms up and down.

In the early evening, after my dad got home from work, I borrowed the car and went for a victory drive, breaking a wing-mirror as I squeezed past a parked car on Thirlestaine Road. There was no disguising the damage: the mirror was dangling from the side of the car like a more complex version of the Tommy gun I'd broken as a kid. My dad had glued the broken gun back together; now, when I got back home and parked the car in the drive, he said he wouldn't spoil my big day by making a fuss about the unfixable mirror.

I'd only gone for a drive because I didn't know what else to do. Nor did my parents. Passing the 11-plus was a goal shared by all the parents they knew; going to the grammar school was an achievement they could fully appreciate, bask in. Now something unknowable was beckoning.

Next day, a letter arrived confirming what I'd been told over the phone: I was going to Oxford.

Gloucester: Methinks thy voice is alter'd, and thou speak'st In better phrase and matter than thou didst.

Edgar: You're much deceiv'd; in nothing am I chang'd But in my garments.

Gloucester: Methinks you're better spoken.

King Lear

‘Jerusalem’

Oxford lies beyond the boundaries of this book-map and inventory but there were another nine months in Cheltenham before I was due to go up. Friends I made when I got to Corpus used this time to do exciting things abroad, in Australia or America; I got an office job at the Mercantile & General Reinsurance Company in St James’s Square. My parents were happy because I was finally bringing money into the house, and I quite liked the routine too. It wasn’t until August that I went abroad for the first time since the school cruise in 1969, driving around France and Germany for three weeks with Chris and another friend in Chris’s Mini. That was a (cramped) adventure. But the big event came after I got back, in late August.

In the course of the upper sixth, as I became increasingly bookish, I’d gradually slipped out of the developing social life of the sixth form, would hear about parties and gatherings on Monday morning, after they’d taken place on Saturday night. By the seventh term when I was swatting for the Oxford entrance exam most of my friends had gone off to university. Even when they came back during the holidays I didn’t see much of them. I played squash with Feisal and a few others but was not part of their weekend escapades. I never got involved in the midnight break-ins to Sandford Lido, where they swam drunkenly in the dark and then evaded the police sent to investigate (this part sounded more exciting than the swimming). I wasn’t excluded but I had tacitly not been included or, if such a thing makes sense, I’d somehow been included out. Then one Friday night I was included in! I’d met Simon Buckingham to play squash at the Old Pats club and afterwards, at about five o’clock, we had a pint at the bar. When the barman tramped downstairs to change the barrel we refilled our glasses from the pump and drank these refills quickly so that on his return he wouldn’t notice that the almost-empty glasses had suddenly become full again. After that we both went home to tea (dinner) but Si said I should come and meet him and the others later, in the Star. I knew the Star was where these weekend gatherings often took place but didn’t know why: it was an annex of a Berni Inn on Regent Street. I got there just after seven and joined the group huddled round two crowded tables in a corner. I’d hoped there might be girls but it was all ex-grammar-school boys, and I hoped we’d go on somewhere else but we stayed there all evening, swilling bucket-loads of beer. At closing time, the plan was to go on to the Pavilion club but instead we went on the rampage. We tore off down Regent Street, running over cars. Someone smashed a little display cabinet in the back of Cavendish House and we continued running and rampaging. There was no desire, on my part, to smash things up, though there was a swirly happiness at joining in, being part of an adventure. Everything just happened and it happened that we continued helter-skeltering down the Promenade and straight into the back of a waiting police van. It wasn’t even that they chased, trapped or forced us; it was more like we gave ourselves up, at a sprint. Or, like a herd of stampeding animals we were somehow funnelled into the back of the van without realising that this meant the end of the brief riot and the beginning of confinement and consequences.

At first it was exhilarating being at the police station on Lansdown Road, locked in a cell with Adam, Feisal’s brother: a logical extension of the thing we all wanted from pubs, namely a lock-in, albeit without the crucial ingredient of beer. All we had to do, Adam whispered, was keep denying that we had done anything. Then I was on my own in a cell, lying on the bench, and a cop came in and kicked the grille beneath the bench very hard, very loud, and it wasn’t so much fun any more. The fun portion continued to diminish until we were let out the next morning and I walked home in the early daylight, barefoot because my shoes had been kept as evidence, feeling two things – I can remember this very clearly – *stupid* and *unlucky*.

As had happened on the morning that my A-level results arrived my parents were still in bed when I got back home with this less welcome helping of news – which jolted them into instant wakefulness. ‘You’ll go to prison,’ said my mum. It was another expression of her belief in the almost totalitarian power of the

state, though it's hard to believe that anywhere outside of Singapore could have handed down a custodial sentence for a relatively harmless bit of vandalism. But it was more an expression of the scale of disappointment, the fall from grace after I'd got my three grade As and a place at Oxford.

Nothing happened for a while. I assumed we'd got away with it, but contrary to what Adam had said the cops did have something: a distinctive shoe-print on one of the cars we'd charged over. Mine. And only mine. So I was the only person charged. As a result of this I underwent a kind of voluntary ostracisation from the group that I'd wanted to be part of, that I had been part of for one night only, a night which I wished repeatedly I'd never been involved in, which I'd not even enjoyed that much even when I had been enjoying it. (If I hadn't come out on this yob-spree I'd have been at home reading *Lord Jim*: 'In the destructive element immerse!') Of all the people who took part in that urban steeplechase I was the one with the least experience of doing anything like it before. Years earlier, you'll recall, I had told my dad about the damage inflicted on the laundrette clock; it had never even occurred to me that this kind of thing was part of a good time. And yet during my first term at Oxford, that night – that entirely regrettable, utterly moronic and, strangely, rather boring night – became something I boasted about, almost the first thing I told people about myself. Obviously I didn't tell my tutor or any of the administrative staff at college that in the middle of my first term at Oxford I had to return to Cheltenham to attend the hearing at the magistrate's court. I'd pleaded guilty, but in mitigation my solicitor argued that I'd drunkenly got caught up in what he called 'a student prank'. As a sign of my good character he told the magistrate that my mum worked in a school canteen, that I'd got three grade As – 'the highest grades possible', he said – and that I was now an undergraduate at Oxford University. Intending to move the magistrate to sympathy by delivering this speech in a solemn even slightly pompous style, he succeeded only in provoking his ire. He could hardly wait for the solicitor to finish before he barked out that this wasn't a student prank but 'hooliganism plain and simple' and handed down a fine for criminal damage. It wasn't quite on the scale of the Rubin Carter verdict in Dylan's 'Hurricane' but I felt the crushing weight of injustice – felt, I suppose, like the roof of a car being dented beneath a herd of grammar-school feet.

There was talk of the others contributing to the fine – I had, after all, not ratted anyone out – but only Paul Patterson coughed up his share. The shame, however, could not be shared. This shame took several forms. I felt ashamed at being so unlucky, the shame of the loser. It's likely that, as an oryx is chased down and caught by a lion, it feels not just the pain of teeth ripping into its throat but shame at being the one singled out from a pack of dozens to end up as prey: prey, in my case, to the maw of the criminal justice system. My parents felt the old-fashioned shame of the respectable working class at any kind of trouble. My dad's brother Jim, who had moved away somewhat from the rest of the family, was a clerk at the courts and apparently he 'kept it out of the papers', the papers being the *Gloucestershire Echo*, which probably would have had no interest in reporting it anyway.

Ultimately, no harm was done and this incident may even have been helpful. As a family we had absorbed the idea of exams leading consistently upward, first to more exams, and then to better and better things. We didn't know what form these better things might take beyond Oxford – my dad mentioned the civil service several times – but the direction was never in doubt. So this little episode was good preparation for the larger disappointments that lay ahead in the land of post-Oxford opportunity: first unemployment, then getting sacked from my first proper job after less than a month, followed by a multi-year project of living on the dole in Brixton without even trying to find employment – actively trying, in fact, to avoid getting lumbered with any kind of job.

During that first year at Oxford I hitchhiked back to Cheltenham for another, non-compulsory visit. The car dropped me on Old Bath Road, near the East Glos Tennis Club. It was about two in the afternoon, the sun was shining, so I walked to Naunton Park to surprise my mum at the canteen. She came out wearing her white frilly cap and the blue nylon dinner-lady's uniform. We hugged and, for no reason – a no reason that was so full of reasons this was the only way it could find expression – both started crying.

The following year I was back again, on 5 June, for my twenty-first birthday. We had dinner at home with Yo and Daryl, and Hilda and her new husband, Peter, an airline pilot. My dad had paid to have a cake decoratively iced in the shape of an open book with the letters of my college, CCC, on a marzipan bookmark down the middle. It is the saddest and loveliest thing, that unreadable book and edible cake.

Gradually the shelf in the living room did fill up with actual books – all by me. First editions, paperbacks, translations, reissues. My dad added another shelf, and then another. Those increasingly burdened but sturdy shelves formed an ever-expanding altar, testifying to the magical power of books –

books, books, books – which meant you could earn a living without working, get free trips abroad, do just what you wanted every day of the year.



I was back home for Christmas in 2009. My mum had been feeling unwell for a while and had taken to her bed on Christmas Eve. I was sitting downstairs in that back room, reading. My dad called down and asked me if I could come upstairs. She had collapsed in the bathroom.

I called an ambulance and, when it arrived, spoke calmly to the paramedics – a man and a woman. From the time of the first death in our extended family I became aware of how those who fell apart, went to pieces, spent their time bawling, were viewed not with disdain exactly but with a lack of respect; crises meant you had to be able to cope, to get things done. In this emergency I needed to be as efficient and composed as possible. And I was – until, as they were carrying her out of the drive on a gurney, to the ambulance and on to hospital, I added a few final words to the female paramedic.

‘My mum has a very large birthmark on her arm,’ I said to this overworked woman who had seen everything, who was unshockable. ‘It’s been the most important thing in her life.’ I couldn’t go on. I was crying. I forced myself to continue. ‘Can you please do everything you can to make sure that she is covered up in the hospital, that no one sees it?’

‘Of course we will, lovey,’ she said, with her Gloucestershire accent, the accent of my uncles Eric and Daryl, that, to me, will always be the lilt and expression of kindness itself.

Earlier I asked why my mum’s desire to be a seamstress was expressed purely as a source of regret, never as an ambition to be achieved; the answer was plain to see even though she took such pains to make sure that no one saw it. Her birthmark.

Nothing has ever been more painful for me to write about than my mother’s birthmark. Presenting myself in a consistently poor light has been more than a source of pleasure over the last thirty years. It’s been a point of principle that no one emerges from any page by me looking worse than the person writing it. No one, I think, has ever felt misrepresented by anything I’ve written, let alone betrayed. Even mentioning my mother’s birthmark is a betrayal.

At some point during or possibly just after the Second World War my mum left the farm in Worthen to join my Auntie Hilda in Cheltenham, working in RAF Records. Hmmm. There is a problem here. Not because her employer sounds like a wartime precursor to Stylus Four, the vinyl retail arm of *Forces Favourites*, but because this complicates that story of my Auntie Hilda. The account given about her earlier in this book is an accurate summary of the version of events I grew up hearing – that notoriously malleable source of Family Records – but she must have come to Cheltenham before meeting Charles Backus, so the

Tess-ish version is a myth. What took Hilda to Cheltenham in the first place is unknown. Before she joined Hilda there, my mum had barely left the farm and the village where everyone knew her. The new job – her first – came as a shock. Early on she was told to go to the supply cupboard and ask for a long stand or a big weight that turned into a very long wait: an entry-level joke and rite of passage that, to her, was mortifying. Then, gradually, she got used to both the work and living in a small town that felt like a huge city. She and Hilda lodged with a family called the Bridgemans. They went to dances. My mum even had, also for the first time, some kind of alcoholic drink, was violently sick, and never had another. But the single most important thing about her time in Cheltenham was that it led to her going to East Grinstead.

According to Rhoda, a pilot or a doctor who had some kind of romantic interest in my mum told her about the possibility of treatment at the hospital in East Grinstead run by Sir Archibald McIndoe, who had pioneered techniques in skin-grafting and plastic surgery. Things Yo says *might* be accurate but she is not always reliable. Sometimes her versions of events are correct but she inhabits a realm where myth and fact are indistinguishable, so they could as easily be embellished. So I was pleased to find, folded in an old wallet of my mum's, a letter from McIndoe's secretary at the Queen Victoria Hospital, Plastic Surgery and Jaw Injuries Centre, in East Grinstead, dated 20 October 1947, to 'Pilot B. C. J. Cabnan (No. 2 Sgts. Mess, AAU, RAF South Cerney, Nr Cirencester, Gloucestershire)': 'Thank you for your letter regarding your friend Miss Tudor. Sir Archibald will be pleased to see her and advise on any possible treatment.'

I don't have any of the correspondence that followed immediately after this, but I was able to obtain my mum's medical records from the Queen Victoria Hospital where, on 11 November 1947, she was seen as an outpatient by McIndoe himself who wrote: 'Hairy mole of left arm. Admit as soon as possible for grafting of hand and wrist.'

After a lengthy or at least undocumented hiatus, things suddenly began moving quickly in early 1949 when, on 14 January, McIndoe's secretary sent this letter:

Dear Miss Tudor

Further to my telegram I am writing to confirm that we shall have a bed for you on Monday, 17 January. Please time your arrival as near to 3.30 p.m. as possible and ask for the Almoner's Office (American Wing).

Bring with you the usual toilet things, night clothes, two towels and ration book.

I would be glad if you could let me know immediately if this is not convenient.

Yours sincerely,

[Illegible]

Secretary to Sir Archibald McIndoe

Three days later she took the train to East Grinstead. According to Yo, their father had been opposed to the operation, though I have no idea why. And I don't know if she travelled alone or was accompanied by Hilda. The sky in the middle of the afternoon (which at that time of year is close to the end of the afternoon) was partly cloudy, the temperature in the mid-50s, not cold enough to require gloves but she was wearing – as she always did – little concealing mitts that she had knitted herself.

The notes record that she was admitted to Queen Victoria Hospital, where she was examined. 'This girl has an extensive hairy mole extending from her left shoulder to the left hand, as far as the knuckles involving practically the whole of the arm and forearm. It extends around a short way on the palm of the hand but the majority of the palm is clear. She has several smaller moles on the body and legs.'

These smaller moles included three the size of the lenses of a pair of glasses – and perhaps a dozen very small ones – on her back; one the size of a small apple on her right shoulder; one the circumference of a teacup on her right wrist; one a cricket-ball-sized bruise low down on her left buttock; one the size of a small saucer on her inner thigh; and one the size of a large casserole lid on her right hip.

But these are nothing, are almost irrelevant compared to the left arm and hand. The 'hairy mole' mentioned by McIndoe extends from her shoulder and completely covers every inch of her arm and hand. I've just looked at photos from the hospital as quickly as possible to check the details; they are terrible because they also show the body of a slim 22-year-old woman. I say 'terrible', and that's accurate, but it's

also true that my mum's birthmark had absolutely no effect on me as a child. In a strange way I didn't even notice it. We had baths together, I often saw both my parents naked. How readily children accept the world they are born into. There are no abnormalities in family life: a good thing in this instance, a terrible thing in others.

The operation was performed by John Watson, one of McIndoe's protégés, with Dr Shippard serving as anaesthetist, on 20 January 1949:

The hairy mole was excised over an area extending from the base of the fingers and the dorsum of the thumb, around the margin of the thenar and hypothenar eminences, and the entire circumference of the forearm up to just below the elbow. The defect was then grafted with split skin cut with a Humby and Blair knife from the right thigh.

27.1.49: The graft has taken 100%.

11.2.49: Condition of the graft is satisfactory and she will be fit for discharge after further 5 days of physiotherapy to the hand and wrist. To be seen as Out Patient in 6 months' time.

9[or perhaps 19].2.49: Patient discharged: to attend as Out Patient 17.6.49.

17.6.49: Seen as OP. Graft has settled in very well. She does not wish to have upper part of the area affected done at present. There are, however, webs at the distal end of the graft between all fingers and thumb which should be dealt with as soon as possible. Patient to be readmitted.

It's not clear what happened after this. The next and last letter is dated 30 April 1951:

Dear Miss Tudor,

Thank you for your telegram saying that you are unable to come to the hospital.

I wonder if you would be kind enough to let us know if you still wish to be admitted to the hospital, and if so, what time of the year would be most suitable.

She did not go back. Now that she knew what the operation and recovery involved she could not face a second. It had all been too painful and, most importantly, that first operation had achieved its goal. The most visible part of the birthmark, up to the elbow, had gone. She no longer had to wear gloves or mitts. Below the elbow the skin looked raw, thin, transparent, veiny, as if several layers were missing. She wore a thick orange watch strap over the mole on her right wrist – the wrist she is concealing in the photograph of the Victor. She was always covering herself up, but she no longer had to do that quite so publicly. She said that she showed these marks to my dad before they agreed to get married. That was a serious and lovely moment in their courtship, but the story I heard most often was about the evening they first met, at a dance at Cheltenham Town Hall during the war, when everyone had their gas masks with them. 'Your mum was wearing hers,' he always joked. Again this might not stand up to fact-checking since they were married in 1952, which would have meant a very long courtship.

The birthmark did not just sap my mum's confidence, it marked her, from birth, as a kind of outcast. By the time the birthmark – or part of it – was removed the physical mark was less important than its internalised and unseen psychological effect. So she sat at home with her needles and sewing machine, conscientiously mending clothes and making repairs, with great pride, privately. 'You're good with your brain,' she'd say to me when I started doing well at school. 'I'm good with my hands.' And she was, she was. But not good enough to become a seamstress?

It's possible that she didn't mean what she said, that the thwarted dream of being a seamstress was another of the ways in which she consoled herself. There were so many things she claimed she would love to have done. Some, such as being able to enjoy a seaside holiday, wearing sleeveless dresses or a swimsuit on the beach (the *only* kind of holiday recognised as such back then, in the 1960s), were obviously prohibited by her birthmark but others were quite easily within her grasp. This feeling – the opposite of the

word we hear so often now, of entitlement – that things were inaccessible, was not second nature to her: it was her *first* nature, part of the larger culture of deference and knowing one's place. The dream (of being a seamstress, of having the money to buy something slightly extravagant) was no sooner dreamt than denied or deferred. In keeping with this, the idea of being a seamstress was less an aspiration, a vision of a possible future that was not achieved, than a lament for a past that might have been different, when she might have been born into a different life and body, not one that had later to be painfully cut away, mended and stitched back together with a surgeon's sharply specialised tools.

Out in the street, in supermarkets or – though she set foot in them only reluctantly on perhaps half a dozen occasions – pubs, my mum was able to go about her business without attracting anyone's attention or curiosity. At home, in the bath, seen only by myself and my dad and, on occasions, her sisters, her arm made no difference to anyone. But it marked her out as different, other and – a verdict she internalised absolutely – inferior.

The psychological damage was intensified by the way her own mother had lapsed into illness soon after her birth. When I asked what her mother had died of my mum always replied: 'Everything.' A superb and, like so many things in my family, comic answer. Medically no one knew what caused my mum's birthmark but the familial explanation was that her mum had been kicked by a cow, milking while pregnant. Some time after the death of her mum her dad married again and had a fourth daughter, Rhoda (Yo). My mum, Rene and Hilda were raised, as explained earlier, by Auntie Twins.

My parents' preoccupation with privacy was entangled with the secret of my mother's birthmark. It was reinforced by my dad's life-long ... I was going to say 'obsession' but that is not quite right. We tend to *become* obsessed with something and, after a while, grow out of that obsession and move on to something else. There's a strong element of passion in it whereas my dad's need to save money was a low-key, slow-burning, unchanging aspect of his relation to the world. To spend money – to buy things – was a public declaration of *having* money, an invitation to have it taken away from you. He did not just remove money from his wallet reluctantly; he did it with extreme secrecy, careful not to permit shop assistants a glimpse of how many banknotes were in his carefully curated wallet – the permanent collection from which items were allowed out on loan only extremely rarely.

As well as the moles there were two little lumps on my mum's elbow. One time she caught these on a brass light switch in the bedroom at Fairfield Walk while pulling on a cardigan, almost tearing them off. She had to go to hospital to have stitches. I only learned about this afterwards. At the time all my dad said was, 'Your mum's had an accident.' On another occasion, also in Fairfield Walk, when I was in bed, I heard him call 'Mary' in the calm voice – the exact same voice that he called me up to the bathroom at Woodlands Road when she collapsed – that indicated some kind of trouble. One of the veins in his leg had started spurting blood – he had terrible varicose veins but I'm guessing these were not the ones that erupted – and he had to go to hospital. Strange and gory accidents in a domestic setting, both dealt with not just discreetly but as secretly as possible.

Their privacy was a derangement since no one was interested in them, neither individuals nor the state, whose intrusive reach they perceived in terms that made them citizens of a psychological GDR. Nothing shamed them more than when my behaviour drew attention to them, as when I went berserk while trying and failing to reverse a rented car out of the drive – I was fifty at the time, unable to figure out the electronic handbrake. Their abiding need for privacy may have played a part in what has proved my productive and profitable indifference to it: a willingness to share and display all the psychological nooks and naked crannies of my life.

In the hospital at East Grinstead my mum had to be immersed in a saline bath. This was one of McIndoe's wartime breakthroughs after he had noticed that burned pilots such as Richard Hillary who had bailed out over the Channel healed more quickly than those who had done so over dry land. So the experience of floating in salt water was extended to all of his patients. It was a painful necessity for everyone, but mortifying to my mum because she had to be not only naked – embarrassing enough for any 22-year-old girl – but exposed. She had vivid memories of the pilots and other military personnel being treated for burns, though this was of course many years after the Battle of Britain. My mum was not injured – burned, maimed – but, looked at differently, her injury had occurred at birth and it was total. There was no confidence to be regained because she had none. Whereas Hillary had suffered the trauma both of transformation from being handsome to hideous (though he still enjoyed success with women), and loss of status (fighter pilot), my mum had been *born* as something monstrous. In his book, *The Last Enemy*, Hillary writes of how desperate he was to recover an earlier sense of himself; my mum was born into a life of self-effacement. She would have wanted to *serve* pilots like him.

Many of these pilots and crew had suffered such terrible burns to their eyes and faces that they remained disfigured even after multiple rounds of surgery. Compared to them she spent very little time in the operating room and convalescing. Unlike the pilots she had not been part of that great validating adventure of national history, the Battle of Britain, but for a farmgirl from Shropshire, being at McIndoe's hospital was itself the big adventure of her life. It was painful, traumatic, but the surgery had worked, to a degree. Even though she couldn't face returning for subsequent operations, she went back to East Grinstead in memory, and talked about her time there more frequently than about any other period in her life – just as my dad talked about his time in the army, in India. Her admiration for and gratitude to McIndoe were boundless. Many times she repeated something he had said to her: 'It's the things people say that hurt.'

As important as McIndoe's surgical skill was the attention he paid to the need for his patients to become psychologically and socially rehabilitated after their life-transforming injuries. The fundamental ethos of life at the hospital in East Grinstead was the loosening of the hierarchy within the RAF. Distinctions of rank were insignificant compared with the democratising experience of injury and surgery. In 1941 a group of patients had formed the Guinea Pig Club. Membership of what started out as a drinking club was restricted to Allied aircrew who had undergone at least two operations for burns or injuries. Women were not allowed to join but were invited along to events. There was a lot of drunken, riotous fun. My mum came later, was still a guinea pig of sorts, but the atmosphere of belonging fostered by the club – a kind of elevated inclusiveness – was anathema to her: she was a lesser being, inferior, felt at home in her sense of inferiority. Later, she felt at home as a dinner lady, part of a team whose companionship she adored. As with Battle of Britain pilots there was a strong sense of self-sacrifice in this. Unless she was incapable of getting out of bed she always went to work at the canteen when sick because her absence would have made it so much harder for the others. This sense of belonging, of being part of a team, was lost when she reached the age of compulsory retirement and worked as a cleaner at the hall of residence for student doctors. One of her bosses asked her to call him by his first name. She said she preferred to call him Mr Whatever. People talk quite readily of an inferiority complex but in my mum's case there was nothing complex about it. It was horribly simple. Where could esteem, a sense of self-worth come from? That was simple too. Kindness, unfailing honesty and reliability: true refinement. And being good with her hands – but not so good that she could become a seamstress.

On the High Street in East Grinstead there is a statue of Sir Archibald McIndoe standing with his hands on the shoulders of an RAF patient seated in front of him, head twisted to the left, in pain and in safe hands, healed *and* scarred. It is easy to imagine the great surgeon with a different patient: my mum, with history laying its hand tenderly on her thin shoulders.

After my mum's collapse in the bathroom she stayed in hospital for several weeks. She was dehydrated – and had been, I joked to the doctor, for at least forty years of drinking nothing but tea – but that was only the obvious, easily treatable problem. Tests revealed that there was a mass on her lungs from which, inevitably, she would die.

Everyone had always assumed that my mum would outlive my dad. There was even a sort of plan in place for what life might be like after he had gone. My mum's adoration of her sister Hilda was unchanging in spite of the constant changes in Hilda's impossibly glamorous life. In the late 1970s CB had taken her on yet another cruise, combining luxury ships and first-class plane travel. This proved a costly mistake on CB's part as Hilda and one of the pilots fell in love. She abandoned CB and married Peter McKeown soon afterwards. They lived in his big sprawling coach house in Lingfield, not far from East Grinstead, but also bought a little flat in Cheltenham. Everyone liked Peter, including my dad, even though he was a Tory. When Peter died in early 2011, Hilda came to live in the Cheltenham flat on her own. The tacit plan was that in the event of my dad's dying my mum would move in and the two sisters would spend their last years together in the flat, as they had when they were young. Their lives could not have been more different but in old age, with their dandelion hair, they began to look strikingly alike – until my mum looked less like her sister and more like someone who was dying.

Dreadful though they were, those last eighteen months of her life were not without some fun interludes. She was given fentanyl to manage the pain and this led at first to an intensification of the tendency, already in place, to tell again stories about the past: both her girlhood in Shropshire with Hilda and her time at the canteen with little Audrey Stanley forever piping up about something she'd already piped up about dozens of times before, years earlier. There was a soothing quality to the incessant repetition which had previously been a source of irritation and boredom. Before I had hardly paid attention when she told me, over and

over, of the value of all the silver and other riches held in the china cabinet. Now we enjoyed a shared vision of my future as a more or less permanent guest on the *Antiques Roadshow*. I began to look forward to hearing again and again the secret – of which I’d been in receipt for more than forty years – of ‘how to make bread-and-butter pudding: stale bread’. (She was right, the bread-and-butter pudding I’d eaten in over-priced restaurants was never as nice as hers.) My dad had predicted that after Oxford I would find the kind of conversations we had at home boring. Compared to what, though? He had in mind, I suppose, the unheard – but somehow heard-of – dialect of Hampstead Highbrow, in which there was no chat or gossip, only earnest discussion of literature, philosophy, theatre, ideas and whatnot. (Talk about *boring*!) He was right in that increasing portions of what would go on in my life fell outside the language that we shared, but wrong in terms of the kind of talk I’d move on to – because in many ways I didn’t move on at all. After the intoxication of the ideological years – dialectic, hegemony, repressive state apparatus – I felt most at home in the idiom of the ironic switchback, an educationally enhanced version of something that still came under the broad conversational church-pub known as banter. Without which the last phase of my mum’s life would have been unendurable.

As the fentanyl took hold, the harsh and shrunken reality of her circumstances gradually softened. Instead of an image of herself in bed, the mirror on the opposite wall offered a portal to another world in which memory was mingled with fantasy.

‘There are pigs out there,’ she said. ‘Big ones with yellow faces. Massive they are. They’re black with white faces.’ From time to time she got it into her head that we were going somewhere, that she was ready to pack her bags. This may have been a metaphor but unlike Tennyson’s ‘Crossing the Bar’ it was a scheme rich in practical if incoherent details: coach times, allocated seats, the quality of water (suggesting that the destination, while never named, lay beyond our national borders). Fussing over things like this was a good sign: the remainder and reminder of a self that was melting away.

‘How old am I?’

‘A hundred?’ I joked.

‘One hundred and sixty-five.’

Other bits of her delirium were the opposite of fun.

‘He’s dangerous,’ she whispered about my dad when he had left the room.

I was spared most of the misery of her dying – by which, in addition to the cleaning up, I mean the *not* dying: the lingering, the rallying. She had requested ‘not to be resuscitated’ but when the paramedics came after another collapse they somehow overlooked this instruction and brought her back to life. She was not so much dying as diminishing until there was so little left of her that there was not enough to summon up the effort required to die.

She lived on into the second week of Wimbledon. Uncle Daryl and I were in the living room, watching Andy Murray beat Richard Gasquet. The nurses were upstairs with my aunt. They changed her clothes and put on new sheets while she was in the bed. After she had put the old sheets in the washing machine, Yo broke down in the kitchen with Auntie Hilda who seemed slightly crazy because she was going deaf. And then, after breaking down, Yo got on with cleaning and tidying. Ruby came by, Ruby the cook from the canteen where my mum had worked. She’d suffered a slight stroke but was now recovered. The binmen had not taken away the wheelie bin stuffed with recyclables. I wheeled it back from the street and into the garden. The reason they had not taken it away was because someone had put my mum’s pads and underthings in there. I burned them in the garden. They were highly inflammable but soaked in urine that smelled not only of piss but of dehydration and all the drugs she was taking. I was like my dad, tending his bonfires – not big Bonfire Night bonfires, just little allotment-style things, in a rusted container with holes punched into the bottom so they drew better. My dad was always burning stuff, keeping the home fires burning. Thin smoke drifted, not enough to disturb any of the neighbours whose sheets were hanging out to dry a few doors away. That was a characteristic of these bonfires of ours: always more smoke than fire, rarely any flames, but not much smoke either. It was difficult to burn these sodden gauzes and pads. They smouldered and fumed. I kept tossing in matches, poking and turning things over, breathing in fumes.

By now we were all united by variants of a single thought: *When* will she die? Several times I was there by my mum’s bedside with Yo when we thought she’d breathed her last. But then, instead of the death rattle we’d read about, there’d be a gurgle, a life gurgle, and she was breathing again, not dying.

There were arguments with my dad over little things. Yo and I were going to throw out the toilet brush and buy a new one. He was set stubbornly against this extravagance.

‘But it’s so dirty,’ I said.

‘Well, it’s got a dirty job to do,’ he said.

Good point. Yo went ahead and washed it, with a hose in the garden.

Everything was about my mum's dying, became relevant to it. The world turned around her. One afternoon, I heard the distant rumble of propellor aircraft. I looked up and, incredibly, saw a Hurricane, a Spitfire and a Lancaster bomber: part of a display from RAF Fairford. A grateful nation was paying its accidental respects. Nadal saw off the challenge of del Potro in spite of an injury to his foot: an epic match in fading light. In the garden that same day my dad told me about a big onion he had grown. There was such a contrast between the ugliness of the interior of the house and the beauty of the garden. All beauty was external. In the garden costs did not apply: it was free from the tyranny of price and not subject to taste. In a garden anyone can be as cultivated, as refined, as anyone else. My dad saw this beauty only as a blur, around the washed-out centre, because of his macular degeneration. Inside or outside he mainly just sat there, 'thinking about your mum', he said.

In the living room, because he couldn't see, the speaking clock would burst into life every quarter hour and announce the time, at maximum volume, because his hearing, though not as bad as his eyesight, was also bad. 'Five o'clock, p.m.' Every fifteen minutes we'd get an update: the horrible reign of time, dead time that refuses to die. Several times I thought I would go into the tool-shed, come back with a hammer and smash that clock to pieces.

One of my mum's hands became swollen and bloated as though filled with cold water – totally dead, as though it had got fed up waiting and had moved on to the next stage of decomposition.

I went into her bedroom on the morning of 29 June after a normal night. My dad was still asleep in the little boxroom next door. She was obviously dead. After all the uncertainties there was no doubt about this: the slight but absolute difference between lying there alive, motionless except for her breathing, and being dead – not breathing. I told my dad that she was dead. The doctor, when he came, shone a light into her eyes: *her* eyes, obviously, but no longer her. The considerate undertakers came and carried her downstairs and out of the front door, wheeled her down the drive and away.

In the garden I sat, sometimes with my dad, on the green-painted swing-bench, sometimes alone, looking at the house, the house with windows in it, made of beige-pink bricks. One of the windows was my bedroom, reflecting the gorgeous top of a tree. Grass, flowers, and always sky. Thick hedges, not as neat as they had been years earlier. Sheds, coal bunker, garage and conservatory. Next door. The lawn, blades of grass and the unlit bonfire. The fence at the bottom of the garden and the sound of the road. Birds in flight, over the roof of the house. Shifting clouds, sudden clarities of light and leaves. The apprehended world. That's the phrase that kept tolling in my head: the apprehended world.

As I began clearing out the house after my mum's funeral I made a major archaeological discovery. Actually, I need to take a step back and tell, first, about a non-discovery. A few days after my mum died I remembered the stash of money, saved from her job as a cleaner, that she kept hidden in an envelope under the edge of the carpet in her bedroom. Even when most delirious she'd kept reminding me about this stash which she'd kept secret even from my dad – and I'd forgotten about it. When I looked it was gone. One of the carers, obviously, had taken it. Except they hadn't. Somehow my dad, in spite of never being told about this stash, being blind with macular degeneration and barely able to walk, had found it and added it to his own stash that he kept miserled away beneath his mattress.

Talk about stashing and misering! When he realised that he was entitled to free paracetamol and other medications my dad began amassing a vast reserve of pills, of varying strengths, in assorted bottles and packets. This came in handy on the rare occasions that I had a headache. I use the first person singular rather than plural because both he and my mum preferred to grit their teeth and endure anything short of a full-on skull-cracker rather than seek to alleviate it by diminishing the stockpile of paracetamol that would constitute another part of my jealously-heaped inheritance. In the course of a tidy-up and rationalisation, my wife and I emptied out a huge Tupperware container of assorted pills, some of them six years past their expiration date. Not to be outdone, my mum's Bird's custard powder, deep within the pantry, was a full seven years past its sell-by (which accounted for the decline in quality of the custard she'd dished up in the last years of her life). It wasn't just paracetamol and custard powder. There was loads of other stuff, some of which didn't even have a sell-by, presumably because they'd been hoarding it from the days before best-before. Some things, of course, had no sell-by because they were never going to deteriorate: staples, foolscap pads (slightly faded but still useable), boxes of pencils of every degree of hardness and softness.

And it wasn't just my parents. I was – or had been – at it too. Earlier I asked about stuff that goes missing, where it gets to, and the answer is: in the attic. That's where I made the great archaeological discovery of two boxes crammed with tea, bubblegum and cigarette cards. I've got everything here in front

of me now.

That complete set of *Thunderball* is here, sealed in a polythene coin-bag from NatWest Bank. The cards are smaller than I remembered, 3 inches by 2½, but already, in the time it's taken to find a tape measure, memory has shrunk so that there's a clear fit between past and present. (What's *really* changed is the ratio of card to hand size, from 1:1, to 3:1.)

The duplicate number is, I think, 54 (JAMES BOND: PLAYBOY – Bond in white summer shirt and slacks on a yacht, the *Disco Volante*), but it's difficult to be sure because on the other card (LICENSED TO KILL: BIG FISH – Connery bare-chested on a yacht with diving mask and harpoon) I'd scribbled out what I think is the 4 and my mum had written '52' above it. The explanation must be that before I had card 52 (Q: MAN IN A PINEAPPLE SHIRT) we jumped to the premature conclusion that there was a misnumbering (that what should have been card 54 was really the absent card 52) rather than a duplication. I've peered at LICENSED TO KILL as closely as possible but can't be certain that the scribbled-over number is a 4, though more advanced technology (I only have a magnifying glass) is probably available. The point to be emphasised is that the duplication of numbers is the only thing about this set of cards that interests me. The pictures are scarcely worth looking at, proof that everything about James Bond has always been a bore. (I honestly believe that: it's got nothing to do with having missed out on *Thunderball* and not seeing the woman's snipped dress fall to the floor a second time when we went to see *You Only Live Twice*.)

The backs of the Bond cards (both Brooke and James) contain information about the scene depicted overleaf and, at the bottom, advertisements for, respectively, the picture-card album (available 'from your grocer – Price 6d') or, more glamorously, the 'Snubnose Repeater Pistol' and holster, available by sending 'P.O. 4/11 plus P.P. 1/3' to 'Somportex Gun Dept' in London. I would have remembered if we had applied for one of these guns; the novelty and inconvenience of postal orders was enough to lodge such occasions in the memory.

The backs of many of the other cards – *Batman* (red set with the red Bat logo), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Tarzan* – are made up of details of a larger picture (of Batman and Robin and the variously ridiculous villains; Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo; Tarzan, obviously). Putting these paper fragments together was, back in the 1960s, another incentive to achieve completion and, bringing things right up to date, serves as a useful symbol of the process of compiling and organising the work you are holding in your hand. 'England, my England': it's obvious now that that phrase applies not just to a place but to a time, a passed time as illustrated by this past-time of card-collecting and picture-building.

Earlier I claimed to have lost interest in tea cards by the time of *The Sea: Our Other World*, but I see now that I did have that set, in an album with an underwater colour photograph on the cover. Tea cards clearly became progressively more glamorous and exciting, but I mourn the extinction of *Wildlife in Danger* and the various iterations of the butterfly. I see also that I'd forgotten how many other sets of cards I had, how many others were available. Lyons Tea did *Wings Across the World: The Airliners That Span the Globe* and, even more excitingly, *Wings of Speed: 50 Years of Air Speed Record Breakers*, with the best cover of any of the albums: a red and white Convair F-106 (the Delta Dart) hurtling across a blurred expanse of brownish-yellow desert beneath. Inside I'm happy to see that the Gloster Meteor, designed by Sir Frank Whittle and built at Gloster Aircraft Company, had made the cut. Also from Lyons, there is an album-less but complete set of *HMS 1902–1962* featuring ships of the Royal Navy. From this slender sample I conclude that Lyons was rather more directed to the boyish, militaristic or sensational end of things than Brooke Bond. And going back to the possible imperial underpinning of the tea-card phenomenon, it does seem that, having won the war and lost the empire, the cards represented one of the ways we clung on to it hegemonically. Lyons' HMS series seems an obvious attempt to show that we ruled the waves, or at least could still hold our own in the game of giving ships impressive names: *Dreadnought*, *Indomitable*. Not all the time, though. HMS *Argus* gave the impression that it could be bought in a catalogue, and HMS *Ajax* was a powerful what – *cleaning* vessel? Some were forward-looking: HMS *Zulu* was perhaps an early and admirable attempt at multiculturalism, and HMS *Dove* anticipated a non-martial future when swords would be turned to ploughshares and the belligerent nations of the world could settle their differences by swapping cards in the playground of the UN.

Part of the parable of discovered treasure is that as rare artefacts are brought to light they crumble into dust. In this case it's not the cards but the rubber bands that fall apart: still capable of holding the sets in place – accompanied by labels in Mum's handwriting specifying 'LOTS MISSING', 'FULL SET', or '50, 40, 32–20 MISSING' – the bands have perished and fall apart the instant any additional pressure is applied to them.

In amongst all of these preserved memories is the rubble of pre-history, or pre- my personal history at

any rate: cigarette cards from the Second World War or earlier. W. D. & H. O. Wills issued fifty *Air Raid Precautions* in 1938, followed a year later by *Life in the Royal Navy*. Both sets, with illustrations in a wan photorealist style, are incomplete, but all fifty Player's *Fire-Fighting Appliances* (1930) are there, present and correct, ready to extinguish the fires of the Blitz which lie, simultaneously, a decade in the future and almost eighty years in the past.

Without an album but complete except for numbers 22, 27 and 44 is Brooke Bond's forgotten *Out Into Space* (1956), a series of deep educational seriousness, starting with a tarot-looking sun or gold coin featuring a blazing chariot drawn by four horses and ending, rather unspectacularly, with the astrolabe. Oddly, from a chronological perspective, card number 48 features a radio telescope 'being erected in Cheshire', presumably the world-famous Jodrell Bank. (Did the writer of the captions unconsciously anticipate Jodrell becoming part of the lexicon of rhyming slang when choosing 'erected' rather than 'built' or 'constructed'?)

Jodrell Bank also featured in something else in that box, stuffed into a corner, beneath all these cards: a jigsaw puzzle in a polythene bag tied in a loose knot. At first I couldn't tell what the picture was, but as soon as I untied the bag and saw a few pieces I knew that it was a Waddington's Jig-Map of the British Isles. The completed puzzle formed a rough and curvy triangle with Ireland distending pregnantly to the west. Around the coast, forming the puzzle's rounded edges, was a blue border of sea. I'd made it twice as a kid, gradually constructing the picture-kingdom of Aintree, the Tyne Bridge, Wuthering Heights, Hadrian's Wall, the Houses of Parliament, and Stonehenge. Near several of these attractions was a small piece the shape of a horizontal cylinder. Once again, an educational component or addendum had been built into the puzzle. The experience was complete not when the puzzle had been made, only after the names of absent cities had been correctly identified in an ensuing quiz. (First time around my mum was the quiz-master and I was the sole contestant; second time I was both.) Only then could the cylindrical piece be replaced with an identically shaped one bearing the name of the relevant city: Glasgow, Sheffield, Belfast, Hull and so on. Cheltenham was too small and unimportant to feature, of course, but I knew roughly where it was: to the left where the blue Severn pierced England below Wales, above Stonehenge and under the memorial theatre in Stratford-on-Avon, home, famously, of the Dirty Duck pub.

My first impulse, on discovering this map-puzzle, was to empty out all the pieces and do it again, after an interval of more than half a century, but there was no need or point. I can see it as it had been, not exactly but as I remember it, in the unsorted jumble of pieces in the bag, arranged and almost completed – reduced area, larger scale – in the pages of this book.

My dad was adamant that he could go on living in the house, on his own, with some help from carers. I can cope, he said. Certainly, the way he unearthed and squirrelled away my mum's secret horde of cash before I could get my hands on it was proof of cunning and tenacity, but it was his philosophical adaptation that was most impressive. As his physical troubles had increased – a colostomy in his early sixties, the hip replacement that didn't work, an agonisingly painful ulcer on his leg, macular degeneration – his ability to reconcile himself to his circumstances proceeded in perfect synch. If I'd met him in Thailand or Laos I'd have taken this ability to dwell in the moment, to just sit there, without the distraction of books or – as his eyesight failed – even TV, as a sign of enlightenment. He could hardly walk because of his hip, but was still able to potter about. He'd lived with the ignominy of a colostomy bag for almost thirty years. Insisting that the central heating not be controlled by a timer, he went down each morning and turned it on himself. You'll fall over and die, I said. He would not be budged, couldn't bear the idea of the heating coming on wastefully, when he was still in bed. ('That's the idea,' I said. 'You get out of bed and it's already nice and warm.') He couldn't watch TV, didn't listen to the radio, just sat there, wondering if he could reuse a given teabag one more time, thinking of every penny he could save because then there would be more for me. After a certain point, saving money was almost the only thing he could actively achieve.

He fell over – not as I'd predicted while turning on the heating, but in the drive as he potted about. A passer-by heard him calling for help, found him lying on the ridged driveway that he and Uncle Eric had concreted. He'd broken two ribs, had to stay in hospital in a lot of pain, which by then he was used to though this was a new increment and variety. I visited him, sat there for a couple of hours. He was in his pyjamas, the hours passed slowly, and I was in a hurry, conscious of train times, wondering when I could leave. Mainly we sat there not speaking. The nurses said they liked him because he was cheerful, never complained. I said before I left that I'd come to see him again when I got back from France; hopefully he'd be back home by then.

The following week I went to Paris for a reading at Shakespeare and Company. When I called the

hospital, the receptionist on the ward said what they'd said whenever I'd called: that he was fine. On this occasion, though, he wasn't just fine; he'd just done some physio. I should have realised something was wrong when she said this. That didn't sound like the man who, after his hip replacement – the hip replacement that hadn't properly worked, that he'd only had because it was free, because he was entitled to it – had famously said (famously within our family, that is) that he didn't believe in physical therapy.

Heading back to London on the Eurostar that same afternoon I got a call from the hospital saying I needed to be there as soon as possible. The patient who'd been doing physical therapy must have been someone else. There had been no death-bed conversion to the efficacy of physio; my dad had pneumonia and was dying. I looked up the times of trains to Cheltenham, worked through the logistics of possible travel. At King's Cross I took the tube to Ladbroke Grove, picked up my bike from home and tore off to Paddington. I arrived at the station and bought a ticket with minutes to spare before the last train left. After all the rushing there was nothing to do now except sit on the train, the train I'd sat on hundreds of times before. No delays. At Swindon I changed trains and the small, slow, almost empty train departed on time, in the November darkness, stopping, as it always did, at Kemble, Stroud, Stonehouse and Gloucester, after which I had the entire carriage to myself. From Cheltenham Station to Cheltenham General was a seven-minute cycle ride. I could not have got there any more quickly but I was too late.

As I sat next to him, next to his dead body, empty now after ninety years of highly economic use, I found myself thinking of that other time he'd been in hospital, decades earlier, for his colostomy, propped up in bed in his pyjamas, sporting a badge: 'Private Medicine Makes Me Sick'. I felt so proud of him, of his stubborn Labourism, his rejection – his *undying* rejection – of any notion of religious consolation. It was so obvious, looking at his body, that there was no possibility of any kind of after-life except the one I was going to continue living, in his name. A consequence of this is that I didn't know what to do except sit there. There was no point saying anything – that would have been false, a bit of telly sentiment. Nothing was going to change anything from now on. It was like being taken out of time.

I cycled back to Woodlands Road, along the familiar dark roads, to the house where the three of us had lived: my mum, my dad and me. Now it was just me. Two in the morning. I let myself in, turned on the lights in every room. The house was exactly as it had always been, everything was where it was the last time anyone had been there. All the windows tightly closed, every chair empty. I went up to my bedroom as I'd done thousands of times before, the only child who was now the only person in the house, in the bedroom where the Hawkwind posters and Chelsea pennants weren't. The house could not have been emptier, would never again be as empty as it was that night, even after my wife and I cleared out everything before selling it. Dark furniture; old chairs and sofas; the bed my mum had died in; carpet, even in the bathroom – stuff that no one wants any more, that exists only in order to be got rid of. It would have been nice, in a way, to have built a bonfire in the garden, as my dad used to do, and burned it all.

In the morning I heaved up the garage door to have a look at everything. There'd been no car for years – that had been sold when his macular degeneration made it impossible to drive. Hanging on a peg just inside the door were the workshop coats he'd worn during his last years of work, after he'd been made redundant for the second time. The first time had been from GAC when he was forty-two; the second time, from Heat Transfer, when he was in his early sixties. Those redundancies, those decisions made by other people, bracketed much of his working life. I happened to be visiting when he came home from work after his last day, holding the clock they'd given him, unable to hold back his tears. As with the previous redundancy, when he'd got a job working nights at Nylon Spinners, he was not out of work even for a day. During all the years he'd worked in an office at Heat Transfer he'd continued to pay his dues to the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers, Coppersmiths and Heating and Domestic Engineers and so was able to get a new job at his old trade. It pained him to be 'back on the bench' as he put it, not in the footballing sense of being substituted, but back on the shop floor. He continued to wear a shirt and tie under his light-brown workshop coat, hanging there now, just inside the garage door. When he started his last job he was only going to have to work another four years, but he didn't manage that. Diagnosed with cancer of the rectum, he had a colostomy that might, it was hoped, be reversible. It wasn't. So he learned to live with the bag, and never returned to work. But he still had his workbench here, in the garage, continued making and repairing things. The garage walls were dense with shelves, jars full of screws and nails, pots of paint and varnish. Lengths of coiled rope hung on hooks. Heavier pieces of equipment, most of them never used, were arranged around the edges of the walls. In the middle, where the car used to be, there was now just an extension ladder, lying flat. The workbench itself was crowded with expandable toolboxes, box-drawers, loose tools, all sorts of useful things if one had the space to stash them, until the lovely day when they might come in handy and suddenly earn their keep. Like the two vices, for example, superfluous without

the workbench to which they were attached. (His last car had to nuzzle right up to these protruding vices if the garage door were to shut; with all this stuff underneath, on both sides and in front, it was such a tight fit, squeezing the car in, that I was never allowed to try.) So much to look at, to take stock of: paintbrushes, carefully cleaned after use; turps, white spirit, creosote; several mallets (all looking slightly the worse for wear but still fit for purpose). Technically speaking it was a garage, but it was really a pharaoh's tomb of the skilled working class – skills I'd had the potential to inherit but lacked the patience to develop. If one had the ability, I wondered, what might be the most elaborate, complicated and useful thing – including a work of art – that could be built using only the materials and tools assembled here? I couldn't think of anything so it remained an installation, a work in permanently stalled progress called *The End of the Line*.

The funeral at Cheltenham Crematorium was not as well attended as my mum's; it was so soon after hers that, like a band returning to the same town too soon after a gig, we couldn't quite draw the numbers. Yo wasn't there, partly because she and Daryl were living in Spain, partly because she and my dad had fallen out. I never learned over what exactly – it might have been about money – and didn't really want to find out. And what did he want? Easier, with regard to the funeral, to say what he didn't: flowers, hymns, anything that wasted money and ate into my inheritance. But we had both: a few bright flowers and 'Jerusalem' because we were an English family and without Blake there is no England.

I phoned a house-clearing firm and a friendly man came round to give a quote: about three hundred pounds.

'I thought it would be worth more than that,' I said.

'Ah, you misunderstand, sir,' he said. 'I meant that's what we would charge you.'

'What about all the things in the china cabinet?'

'I'm afraid no one wants that kind of stuff any more, sir.'

As my father's son this offer was, of course, entirely unacceptable so I kept phoning around different places till I came across someone who would give me two hundred pounds. They emptied out the house, I put the house on the market and it was sold. Everything was going through smoothly until we hit a snag. In the rafters of the garage were sheets of corrugated asbestos. Years ago someone, evidently, had offered them to my dad and he couldn't say no. So he'd stored it all up there for a day so rainy it never came. The only practical purpose served by these sheets was that they obliged me to spend five hundred quid to have council workers in hazmat suits come and dispose of them safely. It was, in a way, my dad's final triumph – though of what over what it's impossible to say.

On 7 October 2018, a Sunday morning, I gave a talk at the Cheltenham Literature Festival, at the Daffodil cinema in Tivoli. The occasion for this was a little book I'd just published. It was about the film *Where Eagles Dare* (first seen at the ABC cinema in 1969) but I thought of it as 'a chapter from an autobiography'. Bob Beale and his wife Hilary were there. It was an unusually warm day and after the event I walked up Lansdown Road towards the train station. As I walked past the Lansdown a guy who'd stepped outside for a smoke recognised me. We'd been in the same year at school and he was able to fill me in on what had happened to some of our classmates. Which meant, in effect, who had died. Myles Lawless had died on a boat from some kind of accident. Pierre Laprade had killed himself in the late seventies – I'd heard rumours of this at the time – and Stephen Playfair had died of cancer in about 2012. These were the most troublesome kids in our year, the ones most likely to get into trouble, to come to a bad – though no one expected premature – end. Unfortunately I had one of those cut-price train-specific tickets so couldn't stay to hear more detailed versions of their stories. If I'd had more time then maybe I'd have learned of other kids – well-behaved, hard-working, not marked out for any kind of trouble – who had died in car crashes or of cancer. As it was, I was left only with this tiny sample, these parables of self-fulfilling doom. After a few minutes we said goodbye and I hurried on down Queens Road towards the station. I was happy to walk quickly, in the globally warmed October heat, from the exact spot where I'd had my first pint of draught beer, past the modern block of flats where, as we'd cycled home from school one day, Myles and I had seen a film crew emerging, probably from the flat of Arthur Negus who hosted a TV show about antiques called *Going for a Song*. We'd gone over and asked if we could be on telly but we were too late, they said; they were clearing all their equipment away and it wasn't possible.

In 2022 I was back at the Cheltenham Festival again, speaking about another book, in the Town Hall where I'd seen Hawkwind fifty years earlier. Yo and Daryl – back from Spain after Brexit – came to the event and the next day I had coffee at their flat on Bath Road, the flat they'd inherited from Auntie Hilda after she died in 2018. We talked about cheese rolling, how Daryl had come third in 1962 – almost accidentally, he said now. His main concern was not to win but to make sure he didn't sprain an ankle. (Although he came through the cheese rolling unscathed he suffered his share of broken bones at work, falling from a ladder in his early twenties; then, a few years later, the tables were turned and a ladder fell *on* him.) If he'd won he'd have been presented with the runaway cheese everyone was chasing after, but cheese rolling is not about the cheese at all; it's about glory and fun – and the inevitable carnage is part of the glorious fun. As it was he'd given me the half crown he'd earned for coming third.

The phrase 'health and safety' did not exist back then, of course, but when it did, the event was banned because it's so absurdly unsafe that you have to expect casualties. Even the safety net at the bottom of the hill doesn't quite live up to its name, comprising as it does a wall of local rugby players whom the runners crash into and bounce off. Appropriately, people bounced back from the ban by taking this most overground event underground, organising an even less safe unofficial version. I'd only ever been once, which is strange given that Cooper's Hill is only five miles from our house on Woodlands Road, and I'd driven past the Cheese Rollers pub in Shurdington hundreds of times. I went there with my friend Russell Campbell, who'd been in the year above me at school, when we were back from Oxford one weekend. This was in the days before the ban. There'd been talk beforehand of taking part but we just laboured halfway up the steep hill and sat there, sensibly drinking tins of lager as this insane spectacle cascaded past us.

In California, watching footage of recent races – official again, sponsored – on my laptop I felt a surge of pride that my roots were so near that steep slope of Gloucestershire. Now that it's back, perched precariously on the fringes of a global map of extreme sports, let's hope it survives unchanged and unchallenged, with no further concessions to health and safety or common sense. I don't know when cheese rolling began but, as is not the case with golf or cricket, it's easy to picture the shire's rat-arsed peasantry hurling themselves down the ankle-breaking hill in the age of Shakespeare.

Let it always be there.

Daryl was ninety, white-haired, red-faced, heavy, and hard of hearing. He'd done his last paid job of building work in his mid-seventies. I looked at him, this kind and hardy embodiment of all that is admirable about Cheltenham and the land around it: 'the country of my heart', as Lawrence said of his bit of Nottinghamshire. We'd been talking about the same stuff we always do. Inevitably, the subject of my dad's tightness with money came up, not as a complaint so much as a *tribute*.

'He was so mean,' said Daryl. 'Even if he had a mouth full of gum boils he still wouldn't give you one.'

How my dad would have loved hearing that!

It was time to go. Hauling himself out of the sofa was difficult for Daryl so he stayed where he was while Yo walked me to the door of their flat. We hugged goodbye, still chuckling from what Daryl had said.

'Where *does* he get these expressions from?' I asked her.

'I've no idea,' she said.

‘Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* ... But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.’

E. P. Thompson, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’

‘The only credential he could produce was the testimony of his whole life.’

Joseph Conrad, *The End of the Tether*

Note

Even after all these years the writing life continues to surprise. I'd completed a more or less finished version of this extended bit of homework in September 2023 when I was interviewed by a Portuguese journalist about the translation of my previous book, *The Last Days of Roger Federer*. Having written a book about endings, he asked, was I tempted to write one about beginnings? Absolutely not, I said, oblivious, until a couple of weeks later, this time in conversation with an Italian journalist, to the fact that I had just finished a book about beginnings – specifically my own. In it I recall how my mum unravelled old sweaters which she'd then reknit into something new; I've unpicked and reconditioned passages from two essays in *Otherwise Known as the Human Condition* ('The Airfix Generation' and 'On Being an Only Child'), the essay 'Action Man', and a couple of pieces from the *New York Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement* in which I addressed some of the themes or situations explored here at length.

In 2013 I was one of the contributors to *Where Are You*, a beautiful – and now rather valuable – box-anthology of maps published by Visual Editions. As the name of the publisher suggests, this served up a primarily visual or artistic experience; titled 'The Boy Out of Cheltenham', the text in 'the legend' of the map I created of my hometown and childhood covered just seven pages. Here the legend ended up replacing the map – it's still a map, though.

Some names in the text have been changed, but not the ones that seem most likely to have been invented: Lawless, Nutter and Playfair.

I am grateful to my aunt, Rhoda James (Yo), and my cousin, Ann Bartlett, for their help in trying to clear up some uncertainties about the past.

GD, California, 31 December 2023

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120 Broadway, New York 10271

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Originally published in 2025 by Canongate Books Ltd, Great Britain
Published in the United States by Farrar, Straus and Giroux
First American edition, 2025

Interior and endpaper maps by Jamie Whyte

Cover design by Rodrigo Corral
Cover photograph courtesy of Geoff Dyer

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-374-61623-6

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Or at least we *had* a roller. There's a picture of me in my cowboy outfit, pushing – or pretending to push – the hard-to-move mower but I don't remember if we ever used the roller; it might have been one of many things that my dad took possession of in the hope that it might one day come in handy, simply because someone had offered it to him.

There's a touch of the nineteenth-century Russian novel about my dad's family's names. His first name was Arthur, though he was only ever known as John (his middle name) or Jack. Auntie Lean's actual name was Mabel, Dink's was Edna May and Joan's was Lavinia. Their real names were *never* used.

Wine-making was a hobby of my parents', an end in itself since my mum never touched it and my dad sampled only two glasses a year. There was a suggestion of the chemistry lab about the whole process, part of which involved sucking a small amount of wine through a plastic tube and thereby persuading it to continue to decant itself into big bottles. The resulting gallon-sized flagons were stored in the cupboard beneath the stairs along with my mum's cleaning products and tools, the dark cupboard where my friends and I watched strips of filmed cartoons, beamed from a toy projector: a narrow band of coloured light and inanimate action which corresponded to the view through the slit of a tank turret, like the one featured in the American comic *Our Fighting Forces*, so this understairs cupboard was, simultaneously, both secret cinema and tank.

That was in 1966; it seems strange, given that we were hosting the World Cup, that Brooke Bond did not come out with a football-themed series that year. In 1970, the year of the Mexico World Cup, Brooke Bond proceeded – ‘slow ahead’, as it were – with *The Saga of Ships* rather than a football collection, possibly because the market for football memorabilia was so thoroughly sated elsewhere. Esso came out with a series of thirty coins of the England squad, the full set of which could be mounted, in two shiny concentric circles, on a blue display board. Naturally, I collected these too. If it was collectable, I collected it.

On Saturdays the telly started earlier, at lunchtime, but apart from *Football Preview* and the wrestling this consisted mainly of horse-racing, from Newmarket for example – which compared unfavourably with the excitement of our Christmas card games – and, in March each year, from Cheltenham itself. The drizzle and dreariness of those televised race meetings was absolute and unsurpassable, but the Grand National retained a special place in the calendar of our affections. Every year my dad would go to the bookie's on Bath Road and place modest each-way bets for each of us (I always picked a horse with the funnest name) and we'd gather round the telly with freshly vested interest. Between us we seemed always to come out quits or slightly ahead, which is presumably why this tradition was allowed to continue.

One of the few times he and I did go to a film in Cheltenham was to see *The Longest Day* at the Spirax Sarco social club, a place my dad normally avoided and somewhat disapproved of because people went there mainly to drink. He made an exception because this was a free screening and because the film was about something – D-Day – that actually happened. On other occasions Auntie Hilda treated us all to see *Bullitt* and *2001* at the ABC on the Promenade, which my parents always referred to by its earlier name, the Regal (and to the Odeon as the Gaumont). I've inherited this tendency; the cinema where we saw *Bullitt* has been converted into offices but to me it's still the ABC. Places remain, are still there, where they were, long after they've gone.

I associate this pretty place with something I saw there, something located in my memory where I can't quite see it now: either a puppet show or a man with a wooden leg, something that upset me and stayed with me even though I can't recall it except as a kind of shudder: a memory so precariously lodged that it refuses either to linger or disappear.

Some things she disliked absolutely. I've never met anyone with a deeper sense of gratitude than my mum, often manifested by telling her son, correctly, how *ungrateful* he was or, in response to some egregious behaviour on his part: 'And that's the thanks we get!' So it made sense that her preferred way of conveying unqualified aversion – to any item from a packet of Liquorice Allsorts, for example – took the form of politely withheld gratitude: 'I wouldn't say "thank you" for it.'

I've listened to it just now, the version by Wink Martindale which, admittedly, is not the one we had at home. The best bit comes at the beginning when we learn that the little town where the card-playing offence occurred is called Cassino (which is in Italy, or, if spelt with a single 's', a place where trespass was always on the cards). The second best comes right at the end: 'And friends, the story is true. I know, I was that soldier.' What *I* didn't know as a kid was that the song had been performed by various people, that the location had a tendency to move around, and that Wink, born in 1933, must have been a combat veteran at the age of eleven or twelve.

At Eric's funeral his brother Marce, who had served with Montgomery's Eighth Army in the North Africa campaign and then in Italy, said something to me he had never told anyone before. After he was demobbed he was so revolted by the army, by the things he had seen and done, that he took his uniform and all his papers and burned them in Guiting Wood. Recently my cousin Ann emailed to tell me that 'memories of the war were never far' from her dad's mind. I asked if she could add any details. She replied: 'I really wish I could tell you something new about my dad's war experiences, but sadly we never shared any meaningful conversations, partly because I think it would have been too painful for him and also because I was reluctant to hear and feel the sadness. My dad's brother Tom was in the navy and his brother Jack was in a Japanese POW camp. Apparently Jack never spoke of his experience. Those four brothers all served in the war. All survived but my dad and Marce seemed to carry the heaviest burden in the following years.' So it's worth rephrasing the closing words of the jokey first paragraph of this book: how close to home the war was in the consciousness of any boy or girl growing up in the 1960s.

I'd had a brace to straighten out my teeth but abandoned the so-called 'whisker' I was supposed to wear at night in order to tug a protruding left canine back into line. This extraordinary contraption slotted into the brace while two curving lengths of thin metal extended outside the mouth and around the face like a cat's whiskers. These were secured, under some pressure, by a band around the back of the head. A side-effect was that it made sleep impossible and after a week my parents agreed that it was better to go through life with a vampiric fang than endure this medieval form of nocturnal torture. I've still got the fang, which will feature at a later point in this narrative.

I've placed an asterisk after 'rain' to indicate that 'very heavy rain' was exempt from the umbrella term and because I feel obliged, in the interest of thoroughness and accuracy, to mention a third option which, while still *involving* the bike, did not include my riding it. Protection from rain was provided by an accessory that was almost certainly not included in the purchase price: a hooded yellow cape that effectively cocooned rider and bike, extending from the back of the saddle to the handlebars, secured by little hoops which hooked onto one's thumbs (or the brakes?). But if it was *raining very hard* in the morning, my dad would drive home from work, somehow fold the bike into the boot, which would not close and which therefore had to be secured, half open, with string before we could set off, drive to school, and disinter the bike. Time-consuming and awkward, always performed in soaking rain, this complex endeavour raises a further question about my cycling life in the early years of grammar school. If the cape was so effective at keeping me dry – if it was the kind of cosy rain-proof igloo I remember – why did my dad feel compelled to embark on this multi-faceted rescue operation?

I still enact a loyalty to these Vesta curries whenever I eat in an Indian restaurant: arranging the rice in a circle and then heaping the curry into the middle, as per the illustration on the packet.

While we're on the subject of what T. S. Eliot, in an admittedly different context, called 'shabby equipment always deteriorating', this phase of my tennis life coincided with a craze for ping-pong taking hold at school. Though rightly despised, the paddles given to me by Uncle Harry – and promptly thrown away – would have come in handy as we made do with an even more primitive array of equipment. The table comprised four dining tables shoved together with our rolled-up blazers serving as a sausagey net. Every four or five points the ball would hit the ridges of the joined tables and fly off independently of any spin imparted by the surprisingly adaptable blue hymn books we used as bats.

Another occasion of unexpected fury – not provoked by me – was also swine-related. We were driving along Shurdington Road, on our way to visit the relatives, when he screeched to a halt in the layby to upbraid a couple of kids who were throwing stones at pigs in the field.

In my forties, when an American friend was writing a book about rock music, we came to the conclusion, after much discussion and taking in all available evidence and candidates, that Creedence were the central rock band of all time.

I was becoming quite the cosmopolitan: this was my second trip to London in just a couple of months. Hilda's boyfriend CB had given my dad and me tickets for the League Cup Final: Chelsea versus Stoke. He picked us up at Paddington and we drove around London – Buckingham Palace – in his white Rolls-Royce. Then we visited his tall narrow house – in Knightsbridge, I think – and went for lunch in what he said was the best fish and chip restaurant in London, though it didn't seem like a fish and chip place at all. It had already been an epic day, even before my dad and I got the tube to Wembley to see Chelsea lose 2–1. That knocked the wind out of our sails – or my sail at any rate – and we still had to get the tube back to Paddington and the train back to Cheltenham.

There was a further hard-rock overlap in the form of Deep Purple's album *Stormbringer*.

Unseen in the picture is the door to this sanctum, dense with pictures cut from *Melody Maker* and the *NME*, the poster of the skeleton on the toilet, a large black-and-white card of an elephant pissing (captioned 'It never rains but it pours') and various other bits and pieces. Adolescents, it seems, have a great urge to create collages of one kind or another – appropriately, because collage is modernism in its teens?

While there was some interaction with kids at the various secondary moderns – Monkscroft in particular, by virtue of its proximity to the grammar – we had absolutely no contact with any of the boys or girls at Cheltenham College. We must have seen them in the streets sometimes, as in the film, but they didn't even touch our consciousness or our lives.

Queen played the Town Hall in March 1974. After the gig all four members of the band signed the cover of their new album, *Queen II*, for me. No idea what happened to it.

This established a pattern of behaviour that has lasted as long as my Cinzano allergy. In 2012 the Elevator Repair Service company were doing *Gatz*, their much-lauded seven-hour staged read-through of *The Great Gatsby* at the Noël Coward Theatre in the West End. My wife and I left after about two hours (I'd been quietly lobbying and nudging for the preceding half an hour). We browsed in Foyles for a while, had drinks, went for dinner and were still back home before the start of *Match of the Day* – all while the interminably uplifting experience of wading through *Gatsby* was still in progress. 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the Dirty Duck.'

These two purchases further complicate the dating of the pictures of my bedroom, since both albums are on prominent display in my mum's arms. Either I started that Saturday job earlier than I recall or the dating of the picture has to be pushed back to when I was sixteen and in the sixth form, in 1974. How maddening this all is! But the uncertainty makes a major film adaptation of this book even more likely. There's a real thriller element here. Maybe the long-lost receipt for *Aqualung* will turn up, as happened in Jonathan Aitken's libel case against the *Guardian*, at the last moment, on the last page. Or in the style of *Blow-Up*, by enlarging the photo we will paradoxically be able to see more clearly some date-defining detail that for the moment is too blurry to make out. Surely some revelation is at hand!

I was especially sweaty because, as I got older and taller, I became more self-conscious than ever about my skinny legs and always played in jeans.

The night always came to an end (as early as one a.m. in those pre-ecstasy days?) either with 'Free Bird' by Lynyrd Skynyrd or another song I can't remember. 'Free Bird', yes, with the long slow glide from beery high to drunken slovenliness and the prospect of eventual hangover, but what might the other option have been? There definitely was a rival song but it has not survived the test of time the way 'Free Bird' has. Was this forgotten song also bird-themed like both the Skynyrd number and the venue?

Yo was explicitly excluded from my grandad's will, suggesting that some kind of unexplained falling-out had taken place. My mum and Hilda donated a third of their share to her: not a third 'more opulent' but a third all the same. By then Rene was already on non-speakers with the other three sisters. None of this was surprising; it had always been assumed that the will would be a source of trouble and injustice.

